Candace Haven’s Take It Like a Vamp Brings Serious Fun to Paranormal Romance

I’m beginning to think that Candace Havens is some kind of romance Renaissance woman. Not only is she a prolific romance writer of many subgenres (contemporary, paranormal, Steampunk) but she also writes nonfiction (popular culture related), appears on a regular radio show, does numerous in person and online workshops, and was just appointed an editor at Entangled Publishing. Is there anything she can’t do?

After listening to her wonderful Fast Draft workshop via RWA conference recording, I was smitten with how delightfully funny she was. I’m a public speaker who strongly believes that if you get your audience to laugh and relax, they are going to retain much more of your message while enjoying the experience. While I’ve read other books by Havens (yay, Model Marine!), Take It Like a Vamp was the first book of hers I’ve read that seemed to incorporate her brash, sweet, Southern sense of humor and it added a great layer to what was already a good story.

Casey Meyers knows she’s a lucky woman. She gets to live in her former uncle/now aunt’s high end apartment next to her newfound best friend, Nick Christos, while working at being a successful graphic designer at an up-and-coming firm. Nick is kind, powerful, and is a great friend – that he’s serious eye candy is just icing on the cake. But it’s getting a little painful to see him go out with one supermodel after another when Casey knows that she’s never going to have that body or be his type. Still, she wouldn’t give up his friendship for the world and she gets the sense that this uber-rich powerful businessman doesn’t have too many really close friends, so she’s going to enjoy their relationship and only dwell on what she can give him (okay, except for when it’s just her and her vibrator, Mr. Nick, then all good intentions are put aside for fantasy land).

Nick thinks he might be going insane. He knows he can’t have Casey…
most powerful ones in the world, holding a major position on the council which has allowed him to keep peace between his kind and humans for a couple of centuries. But an outdated tradition decrees that he needs to select a wife in the first two hundred years of his job and the clock is running out. The other council members will select a wife for him if he doesn’t pick one, but all he wants is Casey. When his interest in her endangers her life, he knows this is the opportunity to make her his, but he has no idea how to have a real relationship and his ineptitude could botch the one thing that means the most to him.

This was a fun book. Nick’s hotness was only matched by his cousin Linc’s (please tell me his book will come out!) and it was nice to see a supernatural hero who was not the total brooding alpha male, but something a little softer and occasionally awkward. Nick takes more than a couple missteps in his relationship with Casey and, as doubting as she is that he really has feelings for her, she calls him on his behavior every time while still being understanding. My only wish was that he had a little less control around her – I wanted to see some more sexing to go with all that fun verbal byplay!

Take It Like a Vamp was a terrific reminder for me to go out and purchase more Candace Havens books. Any author who can have me grinning like a lunatic through most of a romance novel is someone I want to read more of!

I would like to point out that I do not give out perfect ratings for books. Reading around 700 books last year, I gave ONE book a five star rating (Discovery of Witches by Deborah Harkness – too bad the sequel was only a three). When I give a book four stars, it means I’m elated with it – it’s fantastic and I’d recommend it and the author to anyone who would sit still long enough to listen to me rave about it. A five star book means the book is so perfect I would not change one word. It also means that I love it so much, I would turn back to the first page and start it all over again.

Tiger Magic is a five star book.

Deep down, I’m not surprised. I adore Jennifer Ashley as a writer, have waxed
ecstatic regarding her Shifters Unbound series (which I think are the best written shifter series out there, along with Nalini Singh’s Psy-Changeling series), and recently read and adored Lone Wolf, the latest interim novella. I predicted that I would fall head over heels for Tiger, the mysterious shifter rescued from the horrible lab where he lived for decades in the book, Mate Claimed. Seeing him in Lone Wolf, protecting the “cubs” in Austin’s Shiftertown made me root that much harder for Tiger to find an amazing woman and his own happily every after.

It’s that feeling that had me waiting up for Amazon to deliver my pre-ordered copy of Tiger Magic to my Kindle app (and it didn’t come until 12:21 am Amazon – NOT COOL), finishing it a little after 3 am.

Tiger is wilder than all other shifters, who recognize his “otherness.” Male shifters are wary of him, with even Liam, the alpha of Austin Shiftertown, recognizing that Tiger obeys him because he feels like it, not because he is compelled to bow down to his alpha like other shifters. Females and children love Tiger, trusting him implicitly. His gentleness in handling them and his vigilance regarding their protection is obvious to everyone, even the people not his biggest fans. But Tiger is still damaged and hollow inside from the violent experimentation he suffered in the secret government lab where he was created.

Until he sees a gorgeous woman in a skintight white dress kicking the tires of the Corvette she’s driving, or rather, not driving. Carly Randal is late to the Austin art gallery in which she works and she’s annoyed that her fiancee didn’t bother to maintain his fancy car. Just when she’s thoroughly frustrated at not getting cell phone signal so she could call for assistance, a gorgeous man with golden eyes and black and orange striped hair appears out of the brush by the side of the deserted road. Rather than reliving all the horror movie flicks in her mind, she instantly trusts him. He fixes her car and she offers him a ride back to Austin, as long as he doesn’t mind stopping on the way at her fiancee’s house so she can switch cars to something more reliable.

Tiger doesn’t mind at all. One look and whiff of her and he knows Carly is his mate. While the other shifters keep telling him that mating doesn’t work that way, Tiger’s abilities go beyond his strength and ramped up healing ability. He can see the bond between Carly and him and literally scent her every emotion and feeling. She takes him to her fiancee’s mansion – and Tiger’s acute sense of
smell tells him she doesn’t love this man when she speaks of him on the car ride – only to walk in on the man having sex with another woman on his kitchen counter. Ouch. The smell of Carly’s betrayal is superseded only by the pain Tiger feels inside him which he realizes is her pain. He goes ballistic destroying Ethan’s house and gets shot seven times for his efforts.

Carly, having run away upon viewing the now indelible image burned into her retinas, is alarmed when she realizes she left Tiger at the house and downright horrified when she discovers that he was hurt. Rushing to the hospital, she comes across a Tiger driven to almost madness by all the medical equipment and the armed guards surrounding him. She throws herself into the fray to try and get him to calm down and, to everyone’s astonishment, it totally works. An unorthodox courtship begins and no one is more surprised than Carly, who finds herself painlessly letting go of what she thought her life would be only to discover that the life Tiger offers her is one she wants to live. But danger faces them because of his origins and Tiger might have to go away from the one person who brings him peace in order to guarantee her safety.

My favorite hero is one who is so certain of the woman who grabs his attention that he relentlessly pursues her, that his affection isn’t ever questioned by him it just is. This ideal hero pursues his woman in a way that isn’t about being a stalker, but rather the fact that he knows himself so deeply he can recognize and accept that his life has changed in a moment. That’s what happens to Tiger, and seeing all the ways in which Carly – an independent but loving, gorgeous Texas girl with a sugared drawl coating her inner steel – heals him and brings him an inner sense of peace…Well, let’s just say that it’s a good thing my couch is microfiber because I melted into a puddle on top of it.

Lest you think this is just a great shifter romance, I’m here to tell you otherwise. Because Jennifer Ashley’s strength with this series is her crafting of a world of prejudice, some subtle some not, in which shifters are not only second class citizens but also targeted by those who would hate or exploit them. In *Tiger Magic*, we get introduced to the fact that government has a military branch devoted to shifters, and it’s not because they think they are awesome. Both good guys and bad guys come from this organization, and I have a feeling one of the good guys is going to have his own novella some day soon, based on his reaction to a certain bear.

Ashley also shows us the tensions Liam has to endure as alpha in trying to deal with other shiftertowns, and I was interested to see the addition of a North Carolina shiftertown to the mental list of locations. Maybe we will see more of these characters in future books? *fingers crossed*

Because it’s impossible to finish a Jennifer Ashley book and not desperately want the next in the series, I should mention that we have two books in the series to look forward to. First a novella focusing on the Las Vegas shiftertown, specifically Eric’s hot son and third in command, Jace (Love Jace!), *Feral Heat*, which is due out later this year in November. The next full novel, a brief excerpt of which is included at the end of *Tiger Magic*, will tell the story of Eric’s Lupine co-alpha, the often irritating yet really quite sexy, Graham, and his human interest, Misty. Graham’s got a boatload of problems settling his wolves in the Las Vegas shiftertown and some personal prejudices to boot which are going to make that...
mating nothing short of fascinating. His book, *Wild Wolf*, won’t be out until January 2014 however, so I’m just going to have to content myself with rereading the whole series (which I do anyway) until that day.

It’s after 4 in the morning and while I’m tired, all I feel is immense gratitude that I live in a world in which Jennifer Ashley is writing terrific five-star books like this one. Thanks, Jennifer!

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I do enjoy novels of Ancient Rome, so I was intrigued by the premise of *The Last Gladiatrix* by Eva Scott when I saw it available as a novella from NetGalley.

Xanthe is a woman on a mission. Her younger brother went missing and it’s her duty as a warrior to her clan to bring him home. Set upon by a gang of Huns, she is brought before a Roman general as a tribute. Hearing that she slew seven of the men before being taken, he decides to put her in the arena where she can make money for him prior to being killed.

Centurion Titus takes one look into the fierce warrior woman’s eyes and feels the ground shift under his feet. Hearing the general’s plan, he offers to take care of the prisoner and train her for the arena.
during their march back to Rome. Close to leaving the army, he’s considering working as a gladiator trainer anyway, and this is a good chance to be close to the wild beauty.

Xanthe is frustrated that she doesn’t understand what’s being spoken around her, but luckily the handsome Roman speaks a dialect close enough to her own. He helps explain her situation and clearly wants to help her survive this “Colosseum” he refers to. She loves warming his bed but can’t stand other Romans or the city and counts the days until she can escape, hopefully with Titus by her side. Yet Titus cannot use the property of the general – in this case, Xanthe’s body – without putting them both in danger, and their secret is betrayed. When the price of her freedom might be that of her newfound love, Xanthe isn’t sure she can pay it.

I loved the characters of Xanthe and Titus. In only 97 pages, the reader gets a good picture painted of both characters and their background, rapidly understanding these are two people with similar warrior values who unsurprisingly come together. I felt that the sex scenes could have been more in depth (basically you get the sense they are really attracted to each other and BAM they are kissing and having sex in only a few paragraphs – I wanted more!) but the affection between them was substantial and real.

There were a few historical elements that I’m pretty sure were off (I don’t think gladiators – or anyone other than the Imperial family – could wear purple, for example) but they were very minor. I think Eva Scott actually made Rome a lot less sinister than it actually was, but I appreciated her executive decisions since it moved the plot along. Considering that gladiators were often pimped out to aristocrats, I have trouble believing a beautiful female fighter wouldn’t have met the same fate and continued to earn her owner plenty of money. Thank goodness it didn’t happen to Xanthe (although she would have gutted anyone who tried).

Never having heard of Escape Publishing, I discovered that they are an Australian publishing house devoted to romance (of all subgenres) and owned by Harlequin. Hmmm. I was sufficiently impressed enough by this novella and Escape’s website to keep a close eye on future offerings from this publisher!

Considering the open-ended final paragraph that left the writer capable of shifting to Xanthe’s missing brother’s story (with a glimpse at our happy couple, perhaps?) I’ll be purchasing this author’s future historical novellas. Great job, Eva Scott and Escape!
A writer who can pen hot, steamy, and emotional sex scenes – interactions that are a lot more than tab A going into slot B – always win my loyalty.

I know there are people who love sweet romance and don’t need to to see what happens in the bedroom, but for me, those bedroom scenes often say more about a relationship than the dialogue or character descriptions. Sex also strips people down (no pun intended) to their essential self with the result being that it’s often obvious that a couple is in love with one another before they get around to actually revealing that fact in words. As Stacia Kane puts it “… the fact is, the deepest truths of our characters can be found when they are naked, when they are at their most vulnerable both physically and emotionally, when they let their guards down and just interact.” (Kane, p. 125)

A sex scene – a good one – is the epitome of showing and not telling. “I’m so hot for you” is not as strong as “His hand trembled as he touched his thumb to the thudding pulse in her neck, a beat he had to taste under his tongue while he reminded himself, go slow, don’t rush this…” Just like any other writing skill, some writers are better at this than others and no matter how much of a natural you are, understanding the elements of a good sex scene that take it from “okay, they are having sex” to “my book just burst into flames and not from an ereader malfunction” is vital to success.

Why We Need Great Sex Scenes

Stacia Kane’s fantastic primer for writers is infinitely valuable to readers as well. We know that we love a certain author or a certain scene but can’t always put our finger on why. In her book, *Be a Sex Writing Strumpet*, Kane took a series of blog posts and organized them into densely packed book focused on understanding why sex scenes can be so vital to plot and character development, how to write them well, and exercises to help each writer understand his or her sex writing voice and comfort level. It’s pure gold for $2.99.

But your crotchety uncle and that nun who taught you in the second grade definitely don’t feel sex should be in books, which begs the question, do we really need sex scenes? Hell, yes! I think I’m going to let Stacia Kane answer:

> If you can find another way to illuminate the most private acts of your characters, to demonstrate their connection, their trust, the depth of their feelings..., their desire for each other, the moment their relationship deepens and changes beyond anything they’ve been through before, while also strengthening the story, increasing tension, and adding complications, and also—let’s be honest here—giving the reader what they’ve been waiting for, and you can do all of that in one scene, then no, you don’t need the sex scene.
>(Kane, p. 6)
That’s a lot of points in favor of the sex scene. Note she didn’t say titillation? One of the major criticisms of romance novels (and clearly plenty of books outside the genre have sex scenes but they are expected in romance) has always been the “pornographic” nature of the sex. This criticism has always seemed like total bull to me; I’ve never seen a crime or horror writer criticized for too gory a murder. Instead the critic just grimly mentions the level of violence to the reader, as if it’s a point in their favor about their writing style and that they don’t shy away from reality. But romance writers – and let’s face it, it’s because they are usually women writing for mainly other women – get the “mommy porn” thing because god forbid we should show anyone what two people engaged in a mutually satisfying, sexually healthy relationship looks like. Those soccer moms might get ideas or “gasp” expectations.

Some key points Kane touches upon for writers (and which are visible to readers) are vital for emotionally tying us to the characters. Her warning to make everyone wait (for example, the suggestion to write an amazing kissing scene that’s clearly headed you-know-where and interrupt it) builds anticipation. For writers blocked about writing sex scenes, she has the brilliant idea of writing a dialogue between your characters where they talk about their feelings – and then you turn it into a sex scene where they are showing all those emotions through their actions.

Because that’s the point, isn’t it? That our characters show their true selves via their actions (and okay, sometimes their words, when they are actually coherent having sex) and that everything – from first glance to foreplay to actual sex to the aftermath – is built around revealing their soul and their emotion for one another. Let’s take a look at my top love scenes that fit this bill.

**Memorable Sex Scenes: The *Mrrroooowwww* Worth Reading and Re-reading**

If you’re a romance reader, there are memorable sex scenes that are so hot you can’t help but think of them as I’m writing about this topic. Naturally, the writers showcased are women who also happen to be incredibly talented at strong characterization and airtight plotting, but since I’ve seen those qualities in other writers who are terrible at writing sex scenes, I consider these ladies to be the total package. Here are my favorites and why, in no particular order.

**Author:** Jeaniene Frost
**Book:** *This Side of the Grave* (*Night Huntress* series #5)
**Genre:** Paranormal/Urban Fantasy
**Couple:** Cat & Bones
Why: I adore this series (Jeaniene Frost seems incapable of writing anything that’s not absolutely stellar) and I’m sure people familiar with it are surprised that I didn’t list the famous/infamous chapter from the second book in the series, One Foot in the Grave. I absolutely agree that half-vampire Cat Crawfield and her vampire lover/husband/former professional where Bones is an unbearably hot combination, but that truly astonishing sex scene is brought about the presence of Bones’ former lover Annette and his need to prove to her that she’s truly the love of his heart after she lays down a challenge to him to make her blush the next morning (and she does).

But the sex scene in This Side of the Grave is one between two people who have weathered ups and downs in their relationship and are secure as a result, and it gets listed here because of one very specific reason. It’s not just the unbelievably inventive combination of candle wax and fangs, but the fact that Cat consciously lets down her final barrier in her relationship with Bones – the fear of how devastated he would be if she lost him. That realization makes this sex scene one in which she demonstrates how she’s decided to hold nothing back by consciously constructing a night of total pleasure for him. It’s so hot and moving that I find myself alternately fanning my face and choking up whenever I reread it.

Author: Stephanie Laurens
Book: A Rogue’s Proposal (Cynster series #4)
Genre: Historical Romance
Couple: Demon & Flick

Why: I am the first to admit that Stephanie Laurens drives me insane with her tendency for purple prose. But the earlier Cynster books, while peppered with the occasional “flotsam” reference (ocean debris = not sexy, Stephanie!), possess fewer of these references with the sex scenes stronger as a result, none more so than Flick’s deflowering scene. It happens on a dresser in an inn. Harry, aka Demon, is the most sensual beast of all the Cynsters and – as frustrating as his inability to express his love for her is – the one place he can show her how he feels is when they are intimate with each other. It’s not surprising she feels smug looking at his ass in the mirror as he makes love to her. Who wouldn’t?
Author: Lisa Kleypas  
Book: *Devil in Winter* ([Wallflowers series #3](#))  
Genre: Historical Romance  
Couple: Sebastian & Evie  
Why: Another deflowering scene that’s a favorite and honestly one that probably didn’t stop the clock in terms of how long it took. Sexy Viscount Sebastian needs a fortune and heiress Evie is happy to give him hers in trade for letting her escape her abusive relatives but they both agree the marriage has to be legal. Not a problem for Sebastian who’s seemingly bedded all of London’s females over age 17. Exhaused from their trek to Gretna Green and quickie marriage, Evie awakes from a very sexy dream to Sebastian kissing his way all over her naked body. What makes this so unbelievably sexy? The fact that he talks to her – playful, sexy, Sebastian talk that is the essence of his charming, roguish self – until you’re a puddle listening to him bring her to ecstasy. That he has an orgasm so mind-blowing and long that he feels that he might have been the virgin? Icing on the cake.

Author: Jennifer Ashley  
Book: *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* ([Highland Pleasures #1](#))  
Genre: Historical Romance  
Couple: Ian & Beth  
Why: If you have to ask, you haven’t read this book yet! Lord Ian Mackenzie is one of the more memorable and unique heroes I’ve ever read. Landing on the autism spectrum in the 19th century meant you were thought mad no matter how brilliant you are, and it’s not like the era was renowned for the tender care of people with psychological differences. When Lord Ian meets the young and beautiful widow Beth, brought up in poverty and the recent heir to a fortune, he immediately wants her while his honest candor and devastating sexuality proves more than she can resist. While I like all their sex scenes, the one that stands out is the one where Beth visits him at his brother’s art studio in Paris to apologize for being nosy (she really didn’t need to). Ian worried he would never see her again and talks her into baring herself to him. Feeling her freedom, she takes off her clothes and dances a little around the studio in happiness with a sheer scarf, which Ian uses to reel her in and proceeds to bring her to orgasm, while never removing a stitch of his clothing. That in itself is damn erotic, but it’s his utter focus on her pleasure, the sensual enjoyment he takes of every little detail of helping her reach ecstasy, that makes this scene one of my favorites.
Author: Laura Kaye  
Book: *Hearts in Darkness*  
Genre: Contemporary Romance  
Couple: Makenna & Caden  
Why: Laura Kaye can throw down the hot emotional sex scenes with veterans in the business and always land at the top of the pack. In this book, our two protagonists are trapped in an elevator together, in the dark, and they didn’t get a good look at each other when they got in. Getting to know one another when it’s hot and stuffy in an enclosed space doesn’t sound awesome, but it is when the two people in question have a lot to reveal and the dark makes for perfect cover. That they get hot and heavy in the elevator (and then take it to her apartment) has been done before, but not like this. The unbridled sensuality and emotion inherent in Makenna, in the pitch black, feeling the piercings and scars on Caden face and connecting them with what he’s revealed to her makes your heart beat faster.

Author: Shelly Laurenston  
Book: *The Mane Event*  
Genre: Contemporary Paranormal Romance  
Couple: Dez & Mace  
Why: I adore Laurenston’s ability to bring her brand of earthy humor to this incredibly sexy paranormal series. Mace Llewellyn has left his elite military unit (one made up of shifters like himself) and has gone into the security business with his best friend. They’ve based themselves in New York, not just because Mace’s pride is located there, but because this lion has been head over heels in love with the husky-voiced, half-Irish, half-Puerto Rican (extremely busty) Desiree MacDermott since they began high school. He knows that she’s the one for him, and class issues and the pesky fact that he’s a shifter (and she has no idea about their existence) isn’t going to get in the way. This book makes the short list based on one particularly AMAZING scene – and let me tell you, there are plenty of sexy love scenes in this series! – where Dez handcuffs Mace to her bed and has her wicked way with him. The neighbors calling the police is a given since lions are extremely noisy while being tortured with sexual ecstasy. It’s off the hotness meter not just because of what Dez feels comfortable doing with herself in front of Mace but because he wants to prove himself to her so much that he lets her take control.
Author: Kele Moon
Book: *Defying the Odds* (Battered Hearts #1)
Genre: Contemporary Romance
Couple: Melody & Clay

**Why:** If you haven’t jumped on the Kele Moon bandwagon, I honestly don’t know what you are waiting for. This astonishingly good writer won my heart with her unlikely tale of a working class victim of domestic abuse slaving long hours as a diner waitress who finds love with a UFC fighter. I knew absolutely nothing about this kind of fighting but Kele Moon’s plotting and characterization moved her into my “must-buy the pre-order” category and she’s never let me down. Clay Powers is a disciplined athlete with a tough beginning but good friends and the way he sees through Melody Dylan’s stress and exhaustion to the beautiful woman underneath will have you sniffling. That Melody discovers she is a highly sensual being at Clay’s hands is wonderful, and the make-up sex which occurs when she travels to Las Vegas to cheer on Clay in his big bout will have you never looking at a picture window over Sin City the same way again. Yowza.

### The Future of Sex Scenes in Romance

While many people are crediting the *Fifty Shades* phenomena or the decline of civilization, the fact remains that romance novels, unless of a specific genre (like inspirational or Amish) are becoming more explicit in their sensuality levels. What RT Book Reviews lists as a “Scorcher” now would very likely have been erotica over a decade ago and there are classic romances that were considered hair curling in their time that I flip the page back with a “that’s it?” comment, thinking I’ve missed something.

My hope is twofold. One, that the trend toward explicit sex between characters means that readers and writers are more comfortable with sex as a natural expression between people. Clearly we see more sex on television and in movies, but a lot of it is objectification, not a loving expression between individuals, so romance fits a vital need to remind us of what sex can be. Second, I believe that there are a lot of truly great authors (see my shortlist above) and publishers who want women to demand their due both as consumers of the romance genre (hell, we deserve hot sex scenes between those fictional people we’ve fallen for!) and as healthy sexual beings in the bedroom. In the end, writers who write hot, emotional sex scenes have not only demonstrated their facility as people who have mastered a craft, but as pioneers showing us all what really love can look like in its most elemental form. And I would like to say to all of them – **Thank You.**

*What favorite sex scenes of yours fits the criteria here? I’d love to hear about them. Happy Reading!* 😊

### References

I'm a sucker for romance novels based off fairy tales or classic literature but have found the quality of such books to be rather variable. Either it’s more about the romance with only a very loose reference to the original tale or the construct of the story is belabored to death and sucks all the sexy out the story.

Marie Hall’s Kingdom series not only takes five well-known stories and sets them on their (very) sexy ear, but manages to also reinvent characters and twist plots until the reader is left with a delightful heartfelt romance not lacking in heat.

The overarching theme is that Danika is a fairy who has only a month to get each of her charges – her five bad boys – properly mated or they’ll die. She genuinely cares about each of these rogues who range from morosely unhappy to borderline insane due to the absence of the proper woman in their lives. She reveals that each man’s perfect match resides outside their world – the “Kingdom” – and that’s why they’ve not met her yet. But Danika has her mission.

Because the Mad Hatter is the most damaged and therefore the most in need of the healing power of his true mate, Danika picks him to go first, but the path of love is hardly easy. In Her Mad Hatter, Danika heads to the new cupcake parlor owned by Alice Lu, descendent of the same Alice who inspired Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland book. Alice is the spitting image of her great-grandmother, a
You see, young Alice discovers that her great-grandmother was actually a colossal bitch who was taken to Kingdom – the Wonderland region – and duped Hatter into thinking that she loved him when in actuality she wanted the power he could offer her as his mate. But Wonderland never accepted her as it saw her true nature and she returned to earth. Alice is gobsmacked at the revelation – she was the perennial geeky goth kid, carrying around her *Alice in Wonderland* book since she had a major crush on the Mad Hatter, to the point where she believed that he came to her when she was dying in the hospital of brain cancer.

Alice is elated to finally meet the man literally of her dreams but quickly comprehends the hate in his eyes when Danika explains her great-grandmother’s deception. Hatter is unbearably sexy and clearly wants her, but blows hot and cold as he fails to believe that she is falling in love with him and with Wonderland. Alice wants his love as much as she wants to help his sanity but can’t fully leave her life behind, a decision that might come at too high a cost.

This book was sometimes a little on the psychedelic side but it made sense considering Hatter’s mental state. The characterization was excellent and I loved how fleshed out all the supporting characters were (a vital piece in a series). The Alice allusions were wonderful but the twist on so many of the established plot points made it an intellectual delight to read. Gobs of sexual tension existed between the characters and the consummation scene was pretty smokin’ hot so Marie Hall has good sexy writing chops to fall back on (a must for any romance book I read)! Finishing it put not only a smile on my face but made me want another one.

For those of us who have always listed Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* as our favorite princess, this novella will make you think twice about your admiration. Gerard, whose legacy has been twisted into the pompous, good looking jock of the movie, is most definitely a gorgeous hunk of man and quite the man-whore. Danika has her fairy godmother hands full pulling him out of one seduction scrape after another, but he’s actually incredibly bitter.

He truly fell in love with Belle, who was a beautiful but calculating intellectual. She ditched Gerard, after mocking his illiteracy, for the Beast because of the wealth he could offer. Right now, Gerard is in big, big trouble because Prince Charming is claiming Gerard seduced his daughter by Cinderella. It was more like a hook-up, and one Gerard brought to a screeching halt when her wig tumbled off and he realized that it was a princess he was dealing with. That the chief bitch fairy Galeta still harbors a grudge from Gerard blowing off her sexual advances makes this more complicated.
Danika pleads his case, claiming that she knows that he is about to meet his true mate and won’t be the Kingdom’s playboy any longer. She transports him to the library where Betty Hart, a bespectacled, superhero role-playing librarian has already fallen victim to the good-looking, “love ‘em and leave ‘em” type before and she’s having none of it. The crazy frenchman in the rain outside the library gets zero sympathy since he’s clearly a sexist pig with one thing on his mind, but he also seems homeless, so against her better judgement she brings him back to her place.

When a couple of fairies appear in her living room, spouting about how Gerard is in BIG trouble and dangling some necklace Betty must wear, she realizes that she’s not in Kansas anymore. Danika’s lobbying gets him a questionable reprieve – he has thirty days to make this mystery woman fall in love with him…and it’s thirty days where he is “unmanned,” completely unable to get an erection. That Betty has total control of him from that time on just makes him even more incensed.

For Gerard (any Frenchman?) this is intolerable since the core of his identity is tied to his sexuality. Until he looks past the situation and realizes that Betty is not using her power over him. She’s a fun, smart, beautiful woman, but not being able to use sex to keep his distance from her means that they are spending actual time together. He sees what a great aunt she is to her Down Syndrome-affected nephew and also sees how all the other geeks (none so hot in their costumes) cluster around her at her role-playing conventions. Most importantly, when she finds out he can’t read, she doesn’t judge him at all, just goes about teaching him after he reluctantly expresses an interest in learning.

Gerard is so physical and initially shallow that you despair for him until you see how his irritation with Betty blooms into something much more. Betty is a fantastic, quirky character who sees Gerard for who he really is and loves him expecting nothing in return. He’s sexy as hell and we are not deprived of the moment when Gerard gets his mojo back. Oo, la, la!

The wolf has always been my favorite character (so many sexual overtones even in the sanitized version of this tale) so when it becomes clear in the story arc that the Wolf is angry and languishing because he already found his mate in little Red Riding Hood, but she’s disappeared, you’ve got to wonder about what’s really going on.

In Red and Her Wolf we find out just how dark this story can be. The Black Wolf transforms into Ewan, a phenomenally hot and usually naked Scotsman (yes, because being a wolf isn’t sexy enough, you have
Red and Her Wolf (Kingdom series – Ewan and Violet) by Marie Hall (Marie Hall Publishing, September 2012)

Jinni’s Wish (Kingdom Series – Jinni and Paz) by Marie Hall (Marie Hall Publishing, November 2012)

to be a Scottish wolf. Once working for the dark fairy desperate for power, he was sent with another wolf to kill the Heartsong, the embodiment of all the fairies’ evil, who had been hidden in the woods with one trusted fairy designated as her keeper.

One look at the stunning, blond Violet huddled in her red cape and hood – who has no idea of her origins or her fate – and Ewan realizes that she’s his mate. He slays the fairy she knows as her grandmother as well as the other assassin wolf since both were bent on seeing Violet dead. Other fairies arrive on the scene, one of them being Danika with her best friend Miriam, and they realize that the girl needs to be protected, despite the danger she poses. Ewan violently objects to the idea of them taking his mate from him when he has just found her, but they overpower him with magic and Miriam escapes to earth with the girl, whose memories are suspended.

Five hundred years later, and Violet knows that she and her Aunt Miriam are not mortal. They don’t age and recently Violet has noticed that she has strange powers and an attraction to dark feelings. Back in the Kingdom, it’s come to Danika’s attention that Violet’s whereabouts have been leaked to the dark forces who would use her power and she has to confess to Ewan that she has lied to him all these centuries, sending him on false errands to try and find the girl he calls Red. Enraged, he sets out to Alaska, finding Red suspended in death and the fairy Miriam waiting for him. She tells him he must take her back to the Kingdom to be revived and gives him a map with spy contacts to help smuggle Violet to the lair of the dark fairy. Only Violet has the power to destroy her and on the way she will begin to understand her powers with Ewan’s help.

What Ewan doesn’t bargain for is the notion that his Red has spent 500 years misunderstanding him. She’s gotten a sanitized version of what happened and even now, when her memories are beginning to leak back into her mind, she clings to her hatred of the wolf who slew her grandmother. But Ewan’s persistence and unfailing care of her open her heart to feelings she doesn’t want to have for this man, even though everything points to him being her perfect match and one who can save her from the darkness within her.

Ewan is probably my favorite hero of all the “bad five” Danika helps. His unfailing loyalty (500 years of looking for his mate!), his kindness, but most of all his wolfy sexiness and killer mentality makes him a fairy tale ideal. Using Red as a vehicle for understanding the fairy politics and power struggle was also an excellent device and one that sets the stage for other stories.

I really wondered about Jinni’s story. I mean, how much of a romance can you have when you don’t have a corporeal form? Jinni is at a point in his long life where he feels nothing but apathy. Born among the stars, he accepted his assignment as fierce guardian to a king but fell in love and was horribly betrayed by a woman. This wound has festered for a millennia resulting in Jinni’s abandonment of his body. He now just exists as an ephemeral floating body and waits for the moment where he can dissipate and fade into nothing.

In Jinni’s Wish, his fairy godmother Danika is beside herself, praying its not too
late. She knows that he’s given up, content to simply exist in his cave and dwell on past mistakes, but his mate needs him. Really needs him.

Paz is a Chicago artist on the rise who wistfully wants what her brother Richard and his partner Todd have. They convince her to go a sketchy carnival because a friend has said the fortuneteller is amazing and Paz needs a reading. She’s shocked and disbelieving when the preternaturally beautiful woman behind the table tells her to purchase a ticket to Anchorage tomorrow otherwise she’ll never meet her soul mate.

Urged on by something bigger than she’s ever felt before, Paz does, and finds herself seated next to hot guy who seems kind of wooden, but she’s more nervous about flying. A justified feeling considering disaster ensues. Yet this disaster reveals Jinni to her and there is immediate recognition on both their sides. As Jinni reveals his tarnished history to his lovely artist, he finds himself making new memories and wishing he wasn’t too far gone, but his time is almost at an end.

This is easily the most spiritual and beautiful of all the love stories in the series. Jinni is a hot, sexy beast, but one from an era and culture filled with courtly love and it shows in his respectful handling of Paz. Because his magic is almost gone, he can only create a couple physical encounters for both of them and even they are of a lighter sensuality than the other books. Hall has written a heart-warming story which is creative in both its understanding of djinn (actually close to the original Arabic folklore) and of its resolution of a happily ever after for two people without bodies when they fall in love.

After a long hiatus from the series, Hall finally came out with the fifth book in the series, *Hook’s Pan* last month. We’ve only seen a couple glimpses of Captain James Hook, but it’s enough to know that this tale is going to be turned on its head and it is.

James Hook has already known true love. Talia, his beautiful mermaid, stole his heart but the day before their wedding the incorrigible Peter Pan, running amok as usual, killed her. It was probably by accident, but still, his loss felt bottomless.

He’s drowned himself in drinking, wenching, and looting – not necessarily in that order – but nothing seems to help. Hook is more annoyed than anything else when his self-appointed fairy godmother informs him that she’s going to deliver his true mate,
which he knows is a lie since he's already found her before she died.

Trishelle works in the same library as Betty, Gerard's wife, and is more than a little put out that she's not spending meaningful time with her newlywed friend anymore. She gets that Betty would want to spend time with Gerard, but to just disappear for months at a time? What's up with that?

After a rough couple of days remembering her sister's death, Trish is donning her usual mask and getting ready to perform the role of Peter Pan at the local playhouse – she already plays the role of a happy person every day so what's one more role? Before her rehearsal Betty and Gerard ask her to go to lunch, springing on her some crazy bull about “the Kingdom” where fairy tales and characters from stories actually exist. Hurt at their mocking, Trish huffs off to get her performance, only to be “rescued” from a fire by Betty and Gerard and...a demon bug.

It's not actually a demon bug, but some kind of fairy claiming Trish is Hook's true mate reincarnated. Dropped literally at Hook's feet onboard his ship, she's irritated to say the least. Yes, this guy with his sexy British accent and hard man flesh would be great for a tumble, but she's not going to pretend to be something or someone she's not and Trish doesn't believe in love.

Hook can't help but admire the curvaceous blonde in front of him despite her revolting Pan costume, although he doesn't believe for a moment she's his Talia. Her sass and feistiness has him grinning from ear to ear, much to the astonishment of his men. The two of them can agree on some key points, however. Peter Pan is a sociopath enabled by Tinkerbell, Trish and Hook have serious chemistry and there is no way they will fall in love with each other.

James is the classic wounded hero and the richly painted world of the ocean (above and below the water line) is amazingly done by Hall. Trish is pretty damaged herself, and while I'm pretty leery of the reincarnation trope, this was well-handled with everyone acknowledging Trish’s unique personality. Tinkerbell is the psycho helicopter Mom everyone has met, not realizing how her crappy mothering is actually creating the time bomb that is Peter Pan. The resolution is wonderful, although I did wonder why nothing came of her gift of the little sea horse.

The series also has the bonus of being infinitely affordable. I read Her Mad Hatter because it was free on Amazon, but none of the other books broke the bank at a mere $2.99 each (Hook's Pan is a little more expensive, but still under $4.00), reasonable for a hefty novella slightly smaller than a Harlequin novel. Hall even has a bundled deal, charging only $2.99 for the first three books, and now that the final book is out with Hook's Pan, I'm thinking she'll do another bundle. According to Marie Hall's website, she's planning on releasing a short about the fairy Danika (something naughty with the huntsman, perhaps?) and her afterword in Hook's Pan clearly indicates that, while she's doing other projects, she feels that there are lots of other bad boys in the Kingdom waiting to meet the woman who will redeem them.

Getting to read those stories at the hands of good writer like Marie Hall is a delight I'm looking forward to, particularly if there are little glimpses of my favorite couples while I'm there. Many thanks to Hall for taking what are often shopworn retellings and making them into something fresh, sexy and undeniably romantic.
Diane Alberts Take a Chance Series Gets Even Better with Love Me

One great book is a delight but two in a row constitutes an author I can trust. Diane Alberts' Take a Chance series delighted me with her first novel, Try Me (which I devoured last summer) but she’s proven herself an author to be reckoned with after this month’s release of the second in that series, Love Me.

In glancing at the cover, it’s not hard to see what drew me! Entangled Publishing could give the fuddy-duddy Big Six publishers lessons in how to produce contemporary romance covers that have depth and appeal – and look like they are from this century. This one conveys a great deal about the hero, with not only his military background clearly indicated by the dog tags and bullets, but the tattoos indicating a tough background (do you love the title at the top and the author name at the waist? It’s genius,) and the heart on his pec helping us realize that there’s a chance for a happily ever after. The bare chest and sculpted abs also successfully transmit that this is a book with a high sensuality rating, or in common parlance, Mmmrrrowwwww.

Jeremy has had a pretty crappy R&R in his hometown of Las Vegas. He hadn’t even enjoyed his first sip of beer before some asshole sailor took offense that Jeremy was a Marine and a colossal fistfight ensued. He’s not sure how, but...
he's now wandering the Mars landscape of a desert, beaten and dehydrated. When a lone car screeches to a halt, knocking him on his butt, he's wondering if his life can get any worse, and it does. The professionally dressed beauty asking him if he's okay is none other than Erica, who he's been in love with since he first saw her in the first grade.

He hasn't seen her for seven years, not since the day her brother Tommy – who happened to be Jeremy's best friend – accused him of sleeping with his wife. Jeremy might actually have been the only man Nicole didn't sleep with, but the colossal hurt of his best friend turning on him sent him straight to the bottle. Drunk and wounded by the accusation, he turned up on Erica's doorstep to drunkenly profess his long-standing love for her. Rather than answer she just ran away and Jeremy in turn ran into the arms of the Marines, having lost the two people who meant everything to him.

Erica cannot believe it’s Jeremy she just rescued – gorgeous, kind Jeremy who she’s been in love with forever. She knows that her brother should have realized Jeremy would never have slept with his bitch of a wife and she also knows that she should have had the backbone to put up a protest, particularly after Jeremy told her he loved her. Now that Jeremy is here, he's just as tempting as ever but Erica knows she can't have him. She’s harboring a secret that puts him off limits to her, although her body hasn’t gotten the memo.

Because they both know one another already, this romance has serious backbone and progresses rapidly as Jeremy and Erica both succumb to the heat that has always been between them. There is no way to not love the persistent, loyal Jeremy who can’t seem to stop himself from hoping where Erica is concerned. The dialogue is outstanding, conveying a playfulness between the couple that speaks to their longstanding relationship as friends, and while there isn’t a lot of sex since they are both working through their issues and emotions, sexual tension abounds and the sex scene at the end is worth waiting for, as is the wonderful epilogue chapter.

We also get a good glimpse of the happy, settled couple in the series sequel, the recently released *Love Me*. That’s a good thing, because *Love Me* doesn’t lack emotional turmoil. Erica's brother Thomas, again in Vegas for work, feels tremendous pressure to land the casino near the airport to cinch his position in his marketing company. He's blown away when the blond 50s pin-up businesswoman he runs into turns out to be the contact he’s there to woo, and he wants a lot more than Brianna's business. They are both aware they are crossing a professional line, but after against the wall sex in his hotel room and then over the desk in her office, it’s a moot point.

Yet Thomas has colossal baggage from the cheating, manipulative wife he divorced eight years ago, baggage which leads him to lash out with horrible accusations at Brianna. She’s also desperate to push him away since her feelings for him are overwhelming, yet his two week assignment hardly offers a chance for something more permanent, even if he did want to take on a widow with three children.

Thomas has an unattractive shell that he has donned for years to work which I initially found very off-putting. Fortunately, Alberts' excellent writing from his pov
reveals not only his conflict with realizing he wants more than a fling from Brianna, but also his tremendous determination in the face of her running hot and cold. Brianna was harder to care for initially. It's easy to empathize with her feelings of guilt and protectiveness toward her children, but her vacillation in the face of Thomas' pursuit was frustrating, even while you understood her perspective. The outstanding writing of the children in this story gave the plot enormous depth, and one of Alberts' strength as a writer is her unwillingness to gloss over real issues a burgeoning couple would face. An amazing resolution and tear-jerking epilogue cinches this novella's keeper status in my Kindle.

Interestingly, *Love Me* is over twice as long as its predecessor, clocking in at an estimated 134 pages, versus 65 pages for *Try Me*. Yet both stories pack an emotional punch so strong that you'd swear after finishing them that you just put down a 250 page stand alone novel. There aren't any details up yet for the third book in the *Take a Chance* series, but it does have a title, *Play Me*, and an expected publication date in 2013, so fingers crossed we get to see it soon. In the meantime, I'm going to be exploring Diane Alberts' other books, since this is a writer who has certainly proved her worth when it comes to my allotted book dollars.

Tags: Contemporary Romance, Diane Alberts, Entangled Publishing, Friendship, Love Me, Play Me, Romance, Take a Chance, Try Me

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I have been waiting for this Iron Seas novella forever! Okay, maybe not *forever*, but the original publication date was supposed to happen in April, so it's been two months of me chomping at the bit wondering why the latest installment of the Iron Seas series was not residing happily in my kindle.

Knowing how busy Meljean Brook is pumping out books, I'm hardly going to criticize, particularly since she priced this beauty at only $.99 for the first couple of weeks! That would be a terrific price for just her novella, but I enjoyed the other two stories in this anthology, and they were all of very decent length (definitely novellas and not short stories).

With the excellent title of *Fire & Frost*, these authors have each crafted a tale in which one character seems a bit cooler and one is running damn hot. Whether you plan on chilling out in the air conditioning this summer or soaking up the sun, this anthology has something to help you get into the vacation spirit!

“Speed Mating” by Jessica Sims
I’d never read anything by Jessica Sims before, but I enjoyed this novella, set in the same world as her Midnight Liaisons series (whose books I have now ordered!). Sims specializes in shifter romances and since I like a certain tone to my shifters (see my effusive posts regarding Jennifer Ashley’s Shifters Unbound series and you’ll get the drift), I was pleased to find myself enjoying her characters and their dilemma.

Estella is a liger – half lion, half tiger – trying to stay off the radar in Vic’s tiger clan. Most shifters are not accepting of hybrids, so she considers the wary glances and automatic distance par for the course. Who would be interested in a 6’2″ liger when hybrids are known to be sterile? Not a shifter male for sure.

But now the tables have turned because Estrella realizes she’s going into heat, a sign that she is in fact fertile. Surprise! With her body knocking loudly on her door, she needs help choosing someone to be the father of her baby. Someone responsible, hopefully sexy, someone strong, someone a lot like…her alpha?

Muscled, tattooed, body shop owner Vic is all those things and the head of their clan. He accepted her when no one was inclined to and she’s forever grateful, but Vic is reserved and continually frowning, making her confession of her dilemma all the more embarrassing. He immediately seizes on the crux of the problem and says that she and her future baby have nothing to worry about – they will both always have a place in the clan. Estrella is grateful and clearly her desire to rub up against Vic is just the heat talking, right?

She tries a shifter dating service, interviewing tigers from other clans, and trying to stave off the problem herself with open windows and cold baths, but nothing works. Throughout it all, her alpha is “involved” and his presence must be the reason that everyone looks like chopped liver in comparison to him. But until she tries a hare-brained scheme dreamt up by a friend, Estrella won’t be able to tell if Vic would really be willing to “help” her.

My sole criticism of this novella would be that we only ever experience the heroine’s POV and while it perfectly defines the conflict, I do prefer to hear what’s going through the sexy hero’s mind as well, particularly when the heroine has reason to have low self-esteem regarding her body and the acceptance of others. I’m looking forward to trying Sims’ other novels after reading this
“Conjuring Max” by Carolyn Crane

It’s the 1980s and Veronica is a witch interested in all those newfangled personal computers. Her unorthodox approach to witchcraft using bits and bytes is brilliant, but she’s gotten the attention of more than a few dangerous characters, witch and human, with her craft. Which is why she keeps conjuring dead detective Max out of a photograph in order to protect her from the bad guys.

Max may not be able to stand Veronica’s fixation with Don Johnson in Miami Vice (that guy is a horrible cop, after all) but he’s more than happy to keep protecting Veronica and killing bad guys. He’s been killed a few more times himself, but always brings him back as they are both determined to bring down the mob lowlife targeting her because she used her magic to put his son behind bars.

The problem is that Veronica, with her isolated life and mangled leg, doesn’t like all the feelings she has for Max, feelings that make her feel vulnerable and wishing she wasn’t covered with scars or walked with a limp. Max sees Veronica for the powerful, smart woman she is and forces her to confront her fears and live life to the fullest, something that’s easy to model when he’s only on it for seven days at a time. When the forces against them threaten not just their lives and new feelings for each other, but Max’s ability to keep coming back to life, this couple must face head on the heartache that comes from love.

This was a highly unusual novella that threw me through a loop. The 1980s setting was startling and it took me a while to warm up to Veronica. Crane skillfully writes the situation, peeling back one layer after another so you gradually understand the situation and the characters, a comprehension which leads you to appreciate and care for them.

“Wrecked” by Meljean Brook

Here is the story I purchased the anthology for! Another installment in Brook’s brilliant Iron Seas series, in this novella we see lovely Elizabeth on the run from her powerful father. Continually tracked by hunters – indentured servants tied to him via shackle bracelets which will kill them if they do not return to him periodically for resetting – Elizabeth is lonely but thankful for her freedom as she moves from place to place assuming different identities wherever she goes.

A few years ago she was actually caught by one of them, the handsome Caius. She had been enamored of Caius since he arrived at her father’s menagerie at the age of fifteen, just a few years older than her, but his anger and disgust at what he viewed as her privileged lifestyle could not have pushed them farther apart. After her father’s heart-stopping plan for her was revealed, Elizabeth fled in horror. When Caius captured her and attempted to bring her home, she revealed to him why she was running. He didn’t believe her and instead told her about himself – his childhood, how he missed his mother and sister, how he had been in love years ago with a girl – and explained that her father agreed to give him his freedom if Caius returned his only daughter. Realizing she couldn’t ask this man to surrender his freedom for hers, Elizabeth chooses to risk death by leaping from the train over an abyss in the hope that she can escape and live.
It's now a few years later and Caius waits in shadows watching Elizabeth flee her father's hunters and hounds as she finds an airship which will get them off her scent. He is elated she's alive but knows she doesn't realize that he has been tracking her since her escape – not to recapture her for her father, but because her leap to freedom shattered him, releasing the knowledge that his anger over all the years was due to the fact that he didn't want her to be as beautiful and kind as she appeared. Yet tracking her and hearing how she was the same sweet lonely girl everywhere she went confirmed he has been a fool. Making an incredible personal sacrifice has separated him from her father and his mission is now to protect her from the man's clutches.

Naturally Caius' appearance on the airship throws Elizabeth into a panic – he's even more handsome than ever before – but she knows she can't trust him after he was willing to give her back to her father even after she told him the insane man's plan for her. Yet Caius' confession of his longstanding love for her and his protective behavior as they come under attack prove he might be telling the truth.

Meljean Brook's ability to write characters who are both vulnerable and damaged while having enormous strength never ceases to amaze me. The Iron Seas world is once again drawn phenomenally well and the reader needs no knowledge of previous books in the series to enjoy this in depth steampunk work. Fans of the series, however, will love seeing the little bits and pieces they already know, including their favorite mercenary airship toward the end of the novella. I would recommend that if longstanding admirers of the series haven't read Tethered, the recent novella that is a follow-up to Heart of Steel, you might want to do so in order to understand why a female quartermaster stands on the deck of Yasmeen's ship.

Now I just have to wait a month until the next novella in the series – to be published in the Enthralled anthology – comes out under the Berkley Trade label on July 2nd. Considering Meljean's ability to write one amazing story after another in this world, I have zero doubt it will live up to my high expectations of her writing.
One of the best things about living in the age of the ebook is seeing classic romance authors find a new audience with rediscovered backlists, usually with modernized covers. When I was on the Sourcebooks website shopping around the other day, I was thrilled to see some books of Laurie McBain featured (Devil's Desire and Moonstruck Madness, both classics), although not the one I would love to get in ebook form, Wild Bells to the Wild Sky.

I loved Wild Bells to the Wild Sky ever since I snuck it off my mother’s romance novel shelf and the book holds up extremely well even with a modern light shining upon it (I wish I could say as much for some other authors). The book takes place during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and focuses on some very sexy privateers scoring points against disgruntled Spanish sea captains and getting rich in the bargain.

The book has the flavor of a 1980s historical in that it houses a sweeping plot covering decades with plenty of famous historical figures popping up throughout the pages.

Wild Bells opens with the sea voyage of her majesty’s privateer Geoffrey Christian, who is sailing his stunning Spanish wife and adorable little girl, Lily Francisca, to Hispaniola in the Caribbean in order to reunite his wife with her estranged family. Flashbacks illustrate that Geoffrey Christian stole his biggest prize when he boarded the Spanish ship carrying his wife and her family to Spain to conclude an arranged marriage for the beautiful spitfire. She was more than happy to run away with him and, despite her father disowning her, she has been happy in her marriage and loves her little red-headed daughter and sexy husband.

Queen Elizabeth, realizing the opportunity as her lady-in-waiting fulfills a familial duty in visiting a dying mother in Spanish territory, decides to send along Sir Basil Whitelaw, an intellectual and court advisor who also happens to be Geoffrey Christian’s best friend. While Basil doesn’t enjoy leaving his wife and son behind, he reluctantly takes on this duty, with this cerebral man finding himself quite talented at the spy business. While on the island, he and little Lily both spot English traitors and Basil realizes they must return to England in order to alert the Queen to treachery.

But Geoffrey Christian has made enemies among his wife’s relatives, particularly the ones he’s stolen from while on the high seas, and their ship is set upon while still in the Caribbean. In an effort to save his family, Geoffrey sends one of his
sailors to carry Basil (who needs to be kept safe to give his message to the Queen) and Geoffrey's wife and daughter to a nearby island, with the express instruction to row them out to one of the Spanish ships when the battle is over. The sailor, hearing his captain's boat sinking, goes to check for survivors and is never seen again. Basil and the women are stranded on the island.

Flash forward to a young Lily, her brother Tristram and little sister Dulcie all living alone on the island. Lily is beginning to get curves and become a woman (she’s around 12 or 13) and she and her siblings are savvy about living well in the wild. Tristram is Geoffrey’s son since his mother was pregnant with him when she was shipwrecked, but little Dulcie is Basil’s illegitimate daughter. To the children, it was understandable that these two wonderful people would have loved each other and created a family after Geoffrey Christian was killed, but things are about to change.

The change comes in the form of Valentine Whitelaw, Basil’s younger brother and also a privateer trained by none other than Geoffrey Christian who considered him a friend and promising sailor. Valentine is a captain now, also in favor with the queen and the lover of the fair (and slutty) Cordelia Howard. A sailor has been liberated from enforced slavery with the Spanish and carries the tale of bringing passengers safely off Christian's boat. Before he dies, he manages to get this information to Valentine, who goes off in search of his brother and ends up finding the children. Through deception, he captures them and brings them on board, and all the children eventually begin to love and trust him.

The love goes rather far with Lily, who first resents Valentine and later develops a huge crush on him. The children are all fish out of water back in England where it's cold and they can’t swim every day. None of them know how to live like the gentry they are, Tristram is not considered Geoffrey Christian’s son and heir since there’s no proof, and little Dulcie is almost taken away from her siblings by Basil and Valentine's sister who sees the little girl as the last bit of Basil left on earth. Basil's wife and son handle the situation with a tremendous amount of class (she’s remarried in the meantime, so it’s kind of a relief that Basil is dead, as much as she loved him). Lily is presented with the evidence that Valentine is in love with Cordelia, who is a humongous
Laurie McBain's official author photo from the 1970s. She looks like she's about to burn her bra but instead wrote some of the hottest selling romance novels of her day.

Flash forward again and Lily is eighteen. The children are in a sucky living situation with an exploitative relative who is technically the heir and their guardian and who disgustingly has the hots for Lily. A series of events has the children and their trusted retainers believing they killed their guardian, so they flee into the night with the help of a sexy part-gypsy. He helps them become entertainers so they can hide under the radar and make their way to help. Valentine happens to be home from a voyage, goes looking for the missing children and ends up finding Lily, who he doesn't recognize since it's been years since he last saw her. One look at this stunning redhead and he falls head over heels in lust with her. She's crushed he doesn't recognize her and is planning on cluing him in, but not before some pretty passionate kissing and groping is exchanged. The remainder of the novel is about going back to the island to discover evidence Basil left behind and uncovering the traitor to the Queen who has lived all this time thinking he got off scot-free. Oh, and Valentine realizes that Lily is exactly the woman for him, falling in love with not only her beauty but her intelligence, loyalty, and pluck. Her streak of wildness left over from the island is the perfect compliment to this privateer, although it takes a little while for him to convince her fully to that effect.

I cannot tell you how much this book kicks butt! McBain's writing is pitch perfect – her main characters are gorgeous but flawed human beings you root for, her secondary characters are so three dimensional you end up thinking you know them in real life, and her historical sense of time and place clearly has a ton of research to back it up. Her plot is intricate and tight, with all subplots sewn up and just the right amount of conflict. She's an amazing writer who, back in the bodice ripper days, wrote sassy heroines who were not too stupid to live (just a little naive) and heroes who were not complete alpha dicks like so many of the 1970s and 80s male leads. Her love scenes are plenty hot, even by today's standards, and highly emotional.

So who on earth is Laurie McBain and where did she go?

Most of the blog posts I've read use Laurie McBain's official wikipedia page to indicate her oeuvre of seven historical romances, all of whom were New York Times Best-Sellers. In the “Paperbacks” article in the New York Times Book Review article from February 1977, Moonstruck Madness was outperforming Stephen King's Carrie and Children of Dune by Frank Herbert. The first mention of her in the context of her success occurs in a 1975 NYT article on the latest paperbacks. Under the top ten ranking (Devil’s Desire is under Jaws by Peter Benchley and Fear of Flying by Erica Jong to give you a sense of what other books were being published at the time), a gossipy on-dits column mentions Laurie as a newly arrived wunderkind from the San Bernardino Valley who spotted a notice in Writer's Digest magazine that Avon publishers were accepting manuscripts from unagented writers. She had read Kathleen Woodiwiss' The Flame and the Flower and couldn’t find anything else quite like it, so she decided to write her own book along those lines (“Ah, Romance! It Sets” 29).

The real genius was the Avon publishing house, still a powerhouse in the world of romance, who was trying something new for the time. “Avon, it seems, has been having extraordinary success with original romantic novels written by quiet homebodies, promoting them with the vigor usually reserved for big-name authors. Kathleen E. Woodiwiss and Rosemary Rogers, have each published two novels for an average of more than 1 million copies” (“Paperbacks: New and Noteworthy” 295). Avon's visionary editor was Nancy Coffey, who was credited with setting the trend of publishing “epic historical romances” the size of...
They were obviously clever to snag McBain who, according to the article, did months of research into the time period and sent her manuscript to Avon a year after seeing the Writer’s Digest blurb (“Ah, Romance! It Sets” 29). Six months after that she received the notice that the book was accepted for publication with only minor revisions and then received one copy of the 510,000 books Avon placed in bookstores all over the country. By 1977 what some male chauvinist pigs were calling “the hysterical romance” was an entire subgenre taking the best-seller list by storm. Its graphic sexual content often caused it to receive the moniker, “erotic historical romance” which sounds strangely familiar today (Walters 206). By 1980, the New York Times reported McBain had bought a beach front home in Carmel, California and was busy outlining her next novel (which was probably Dark Before the Rising Sun) (Walters BR7).

Wild Bells to the Wild Sky would follow (1983) and finally When the Splendor Falls (1985) with McBain showing her facility in a variety of historical time periods (British regency and the American Civil War were popular in the 1980s). But then her writing came to a screeching halt. Her Wikipedia page says that after only seven years of writing, her father’s death caused McBain to end her career and no more novels were published.

If this is the case (and I can’t find any evidence one way or the other, although there are still a few databases unmined), it’s incredibly sad, as she was a fresh, talented voice who stood out in her field. The good news is that many of her books have withstood the test of time (and are available used inexpensively) so you can still make sure you have McBain’s work on your bookshelf.

Take a walk back in time and enjoy the writing of Laurie McBain. It’s my hope she is living a happy life at that beach house in Carmel, and fully understands what a gift she gave romance readers with her excellent novels. Thanks, Laurie!

Works Cited


**Cynster Sisters Duo Proves an Upswing in Recent Cynster Books with And Then She Fell by Stephanie Laurens**

If anyone remembers the first time they read *[Devil's Bride]*, the book one in the *now legendary Cynster series* by *Stephanie Laurens*, I’m sure they can picture the sweet scene where the children of the family go to say goodbye at the graveside of their brother and cousin Tolly, the littlest ones struggling with the walk in the night as Devil and Honoria look on, restraining themselves from helping lest it ruin the ceremony. I don’t know how old this makes you feel (*Devil’s Bride* was originally published in 1998), but I end up with the impression that the Cynsters are somehow an extension of my own family, particularly with the realization that these youngest members are all grown up and ready for their own romance novels.

*And Then She Fell* is the first in the spin-off series the Cynster Sisters Duo (two books still attached to the Cynster series – this is the nineteenth book) focusing on the two youngest daughters of Arthur and Louise – Henrietta and Mary – sisters to twins Amanda and Amelia (*On a Wild Night* and *On a Wicked Dawn*) and Simon (*The Perfect Lover*). Of all these books, Simon’s story in *The Perfect Lover* is probably the most crucial to read prior to this one, as the hero to Henrietta Cynster is none other than James Glossup, the younger son of the house and murder suspect in the country house party mystery that provides the setting for Simon and Portia to fall in love with one another. (Anyone needing a series overview should take a look at my post on the entire Cynster series for a refresher.)

Henrietta is in her late twenties having never quite found her hero and to be honest, she’s not looking that hard, a fact immensely frustrating to her younger sister Mary. Mary’s rising blood pressure relates to the belief that she thinks she has possibly found her hero but can’t verify the fact until the amethyst necklace blessed by the Lady and given to the girls by Catriona Cynster (wife to Scandal Cynster and a Scottish pagan whose story is told in *Scandal’s Bride*). This necklace has been used to good effect by their cousins in the *Cynster Sister’s Trilogy* and Mary knows that Henrietta must use it first since she’s older. The necklace heats up in the presence of the man destined to be the fated mate of Henrietta Cynster. Would this particular man be none other than James Glossup?
the Cynster woman, thus directing her efforts. At Mary’s insistence, Henrietta
dons the necklace and the games begin.

Known as the
“Matchbreaker”, Henrietta
has garnered quite a
reputation for using her vast
network of contacts within the ton to research a young man upon request of a
young lady considering his suit, often discovering sordid habits, shifting finances
or simply conformation of it not being a love match. That final point seems to be
a common request as it has become more fashionable for well-born young
women to want to marry for love. When a good friend of hers asks Henrietta to
check on James Glossup, a suitor who has been making his preference for her
known, Henrietta is forced to come back with the information that James has
some kind of financial imperative to marry and doesn’t seem to be factoring love
into the equation. A bit wistful, the friend and her parents are nevertheless
grateful for averting a mismatch and James is nicely sent packing.

Naturally, he’s livid at getting his conge and angrily approaches Henrietta in a
crowded ballroom. What Henrietta didn’t know was that James has unexpectedly
received an inheritance from a great-aunt who wanted to ensure that the
bachelor would knuckle down and get married, so he must marry within the
month in order to release the funds which would allow him to support the estate
and everyone on it. His noblesse oblige has him frantic to follow the stipulations
of the will so as not to put hundreds of people out of work and Henrietta’s
interference has botched everything. He doesn’t seem to hear too well
Henrietta’s empathetic explanation that, since her friend wanted to marry for love
and James clearly didn’t love her, it wouldn’t have worked anyway, but in the
end, the soft-hearted Henrietta makes James a compelling offer. She will use her
contacts to help him find a bride within the allotted time period.

Spending time with Henrietta pointing out the eligible young woman who fit his
criteria and who she knows of are good character and temperament allows
James to decide fairly quickly that his perfect match is actually standing right
next to him. The emotion for this decision is ratcheted up by a series of what
seem like accidents befalling Henrietta, accidents which are quickly revealed to
be a pattern of attacks by an unknown foe. Every Cynster relation and Cynster
friend come out of the woodwork to help (so reread the series and the Bastion
Club books if you want to not be scratching your head remembering who’s who)
constituting a type of Old Home Week for fans of Stephanie Laurens. Naturally
the bad guy doesn’t have a chance, and James and Henrietta get their happily
ever after, with Mary the happy recipient of the necklace and the next book in the
series.

And let me make clear how much I
am looking forward to the next
book. **The Taming of Ryder
Cavanaugh. And Then She Fell** is
solid Stephanie Laurens fare, but like many of her recent publications, she veers
away from her strength, namely the utterly wicked rake ensnared completely and
utterly by the spunky heroine. Laurens’ ability to write honorable rakes
nevertheless well-schooled in the arts of debauchery seemed to lessen after **The
Perfect Lover**, highlighting her weaknesses (plodding mystery plots and
ridiculous prose for the sex scenes that could easily win a **purple prose** award).

In the **Cynster Sisters Trilogy**, I was so excited as Viscount Breckenridge, no
slouch in the rake department (as realized in the book about his young widowed
stepmother, **The Ideal Bride**) fit this hero mold, but the setting of the book being
on the road as he runs down Heather Cynster’s kidnappers, failed to highlight his
rakish tendencies in **Viscount Breckenridge to the Rescue**. Instead it took the
utterly alpha male villain-turned-hero on his home turf in Scotland to give us a
little taste of the old Stephanie Laurens in **The Capture of the Earl of Glencrae**

Based on the teaser chapter, Ryder Cavanaugh fits the mold of our original Bar
Cynster (the virile and deliciously naughty males comprising the first six books of
the series). He’s fascinated by the headstrong Mary Cynster who seems to think
that Ryder’s half-brother is her intended hero. Ryder is taken not just by Mary’s
beauty but her spunk, a quality not well-appreciated by the ton and an attribute
that actually renders her a complete mismatch for Ryder’s younger brother, who would let a strong woman ride roughshod over him. That he clearly sees her as a prize – she is the last unwed Cynster female of her generation and therefore the last opportunity for any family to make a connection to this powerful family – is apparent, but we know Laurens’ tried and true method of falling “in lust” first and love second will prevail. Since this rake’s “prowling grace” and naughty past was alluded to in the teaser, and since it hints at the majority of the book happening on his home turf in the ballrooms of the ton, I’m hoping that Laurens will play to her strengths and give us an alpha hero of yore.

Let me be clear – I think Stephanie Laurens is an immensely talented writer who has given the romance world one of the best Regency series ever, but I worry that over the course of now twenty years of her career, she has lacked editors or agents encouraging her to evolve as a writer. I recently listened to a few RWA conference sessions and was struck by the number of highly successful New York Times best-selling authors who mention that they continue to take classes and read professional books to evolve as writers, forcing themselves to read all the recent award winners in order to understand what the market wants.

When I read Laurens’ books, I am often struck by how outdated they can seem, particularly in the area of sex scenes which I felt were such a strength in her early works. I would encourage her to consider playing on her prodigious abilities (well-drawn characters, strong historical settings, and an unbelievable sense of family) while shoring up her weaknesses in order to make sure that she doesn’t get left behind with all the great historical romance writers emerging on the market. Don’t get left behind, Stephanie. We love you and these characters way too much to watch that happen.

Tags: And Then She Fell, Cynster Series, Cynster Sisters Duo, Cynster Sisters Trilogy, Devil's Bride, Henrietta Cynster, James Glossup, Scandal's Bride, Stephanie Laurens, The Perfect Lover, The Taming of Ryder Cavanaugh

Creatures of Habit: Mapping Out Writing Routines

Growing up, I was a horrifying child of habit with my mother despairing of getting me to try anything different. Peanut butter and jelly every day from grammar school to high school graduation; my books alphabetical by author on the shelves; and when I wasn’t wearing a Catholic school uniform on the weekends and vacations, I had multiple pairs of the same jeans which I would wear with multiples of the same shirts in different colors. At school, I needed my pens in a certain way on the desk and my textbook always in the left-hand upper corner of
literally every hour of my schoolday – so how could I not think about adding it rituals in other areas of my life?

Nowadays, I read a lot of nonfiction (yes, I read books other than romance, really!) and while I love history and biography books, I also enjoy social psychology books for the insight they offer on the world we construct for ourselves. As I try and carve out habits of writing, one book that has an application in so many areas is the *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* by Charles Duhigg.

Scouring various forms of behavioral research, Duhigg examines our approach to life, interpreting how and why we create habits. Businesses use social psychology to construct environments which play upon these desires and the health care industry is equally attempting to harness this knowledge to help us combat unhealthy behavior. (i.e., Need to fight your family propensity toward diabetes? Here’s how to map out a 30 day plan to exercise your way to good health.) One of the main points which stood out to me as someone trying to write regularly while also being a full-time (and sometimes more) worker, is that you have to approach any habit creation with steadfast determination, particularly because it takes easily 30 days to rewire the neurotransmitters in your brain so that the new behavior sinks in enough to be a less effort-laden routine.

For me a habit is very much a pseudo-ritual done a similar time of day each day and delivered with the same parameters. When I come home each day, I sit on the same place on the couch and usually eat one of around 12 possible dinners (eat other stuff, too, but have a set of go-to foods). I read for a certain number of minutes, go upstairs around a certain time, wash up in the exact same order, and have recently trained myself to go to sleep by getting in bed and not reading or looking at a screen since that helps me fall asleep a lot quicker. There’s certain amount of wiggle room in this routine, but I’ll admit to getting a little pissed or at least out of temper if a wrench gets thrown in the works.

So with this revelatory piece of self-knowledge (please don’t judge me), I readily admit that for me to have any hope as a writer, it’s non-negotiable that I figure out some kind of routine or habit around writing. Part of my problem is that I have two routines: the school day routine and the vacation routine. For most people who have two weeks of vacation a year and a smattering of long weekends, a vacation routine is probably less of an issue, but, as an educator in a private school, I’m blessed to have off from early June to mid-August with a couple chunky times around the holidays and in early March where I have another two week block to myself. As a result, I need two writing routines in my life – one for when I am working and have significantly less time and one for when I have off and I have a lot of time.
routines and I worried that I didn’t fit any of them. Most recommendations geared toward working slobs centered on training yourself to get up a few hours before work and writing until you need to get ready.

Uh, I know you don’t know me, but 1) I am not a morning person and 2) I am almost Golem-esque in my worship of sleep. If there was a Sleeping Olympics, I’d be a gold medalist in both the Nighttime and Napping events, so writing has to be part of my normal waking hours. Stone’s explanation of the weekend writer, the after work writer, the during breaks at work writer, came as a huge relief for me as I realized there were available routines I could try to help me focus on writing.

But truly the best recommendation she had for me was her chapter on the “Writing Action Plan”. Relying on an individual’s vision of success as a writer and some practical ideas from established successful authors (one of the strengths of the book is the tidbits from name authors inserted throughout the text), Stone recommends applying the SMART acronym to your writing goals: they should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-limited. Long-term goals should also have the subset of short term goals fueled by mini-objectives. Take a look:

**Long term goal**: Write a 60,000 word category romance novel geared toward Harlequin’s Blaze line by August 20th.

**Short term goal**: Write 1000 words a day (4 pages)/5000 words a week (20 pages).

**Mini-objective 1**: Purchase new Blaze books each month and read them to determine pacing, characterization and writing style preferences.

**Mini objective 2**: Read editor recommendations and preferences on Harlequin Writer’s Community forums to get a sense of key decision makers and their preferences and pet peeves regarding submissions (by May 1st).

Previously my long term goal would have been “Publish a romance novel” but that’s hardly helpful when I’m looking at laundry piles and professional reading obligations. Another terrific perspective with tons of practical advice added was the Kindle book *Write Every Day* by Michael Haynes. In under 70 pages, Haynes manages to cut right to the chase of writer anxiety, giving excellent suggestions on how to ramp up your writing into a viable habit through various types of accountability, both to yourself and to others. I loved, loved, loved his suggestion that deciding on a word count every day – no matter what kind of writing – so your brain and fingers get used to generating ideas and articulately put them somewhere was genius. Per his suggestion, I set a goal of 500 words per day and have been keeping a spreadsheet to see if I’ve been meeting it (and most days, I do). Haynes also walks the walk on his blog where he regularly discusses his monthly writing goals and fearlessly lets you know whether he’s met them or not in that time period. This is a writer who deserves an award for not only providing a great model but also for being so open as to share his process, warts and all. I know it makes me feel better and inspires me, all at the same time.

My biggest obstacle toward regularly writing is the elusive danger of “procrastiwork,” a term usually defined as important work you do but it’s not the work you should actually be doing at that time. While I didn’t know the name for it, this model was my default setting all through college and graduate school when I had any kind of reading or writing assignments (mostly for writing) and I
would decide that my house desperately needed cleaning and why didn’t we have anything made in the fridge? After I got married, my husband adored my graduate school career simply because he came home every day to a pristine house and homemade meals cooking in the oven.

Procrastiwork doesn’t have to be a negative – many creative types think it actually helps them unleash new ideas – but is important to keep a handle on it. I find that while I’m cleaning and doing the laundry, I often am going through ideas in my mind for my writing project so I am more ready to sit down and crank out the word count when the final swipe is made on the kitchen counter. As long as procrastiwork doesn’t morph into a genuine avoidance, its power can be harnessed for good, and I’m hoping that my new series of goals in my writing plan helps me stay on track and keep it to a minimum.

In the end, creating habits isn’t easy work but it can be productive work that hopefully pays off with each writer finding herself closer to the original vision of success which had her begin writing in the first place. I’m certainly going to try some of these proven strategies to make writing the peanut butter and jelly sandwich of my adulthood.
Like This Lyrics. [Intro] Uh, You know what it is what it is when we do what we do. [Verse 1] If good girls get down on the floor Tell me how low will a bad girl go She probably pick it up drop it down real slow Either that or she's upside down on the pole That's when I grab the knot throw it up in the sky Let it come down slow watch it all fly Front to the back then side to the side Then we head back to my crib for the night That's how it goes down, all night long She whisper in my ear says she loves my song This Is Why I'm Hot