

The allure of paranormal romance

HOW WRITERS KEEP THE MARKET STRONG

by Orange Blossom Co-Editor Michele Cwiertny

A WOMAN ARCHES HER NECK AND SURRENDERS IT TO HER MATE, A SEDUCTIVE AND POWERFUL Vampire. She needs to feel that deeper intimacy he offers her, even as she forces away the intruding thoughts of her mortal life.

An Immortal Guardian spends centuries on earth battling demons and isolating his heart from love, only to discover he's now fighting to save the one woman without whom he cannot possibly continue to live.

Supernatural powers, a love too tempting to resist, and heroic storylines. That's what keeps paranormal romance readers clamoring for more...And why writers delight in building these worlds for them.

THE VOICE

However, before you reach the general readership, you'll need to attract the attention of an editor.

Cindy Hwang, Executive Editor at Berkley, explains how Meljean's Brook's epic, paranormal romance *Demon Angel* (Berkley Sensation), in which the story spans nearly 800 years, captured her interest: "As a reader, the quality that I respond to most immediately is a strong voice. No matter the subgenre, it's always the voice that gets me first. As an editor, that's what I look for, too. And, recently, some of the strongest voices I've responded to have all been writing paranormal. This may be coincidence, but I don't think so--I think that many writers with strong visions and strong voices are drawn to writing paranormal romance because this subgenre offers the biggest canvas to writers--paranormal romance is really only limited by the scope of the writer's own imagination.

"'Epic' is a great description of *Demon Angel* and the universe Meljean created--I love the scale of her story. What could be grander than good versus evil, free will, and what it means to be redeemed or damned? And a love strong enough to last not just centuries, but to survive lies, betrayal, death and a stint in Hell? Now that's devotion."

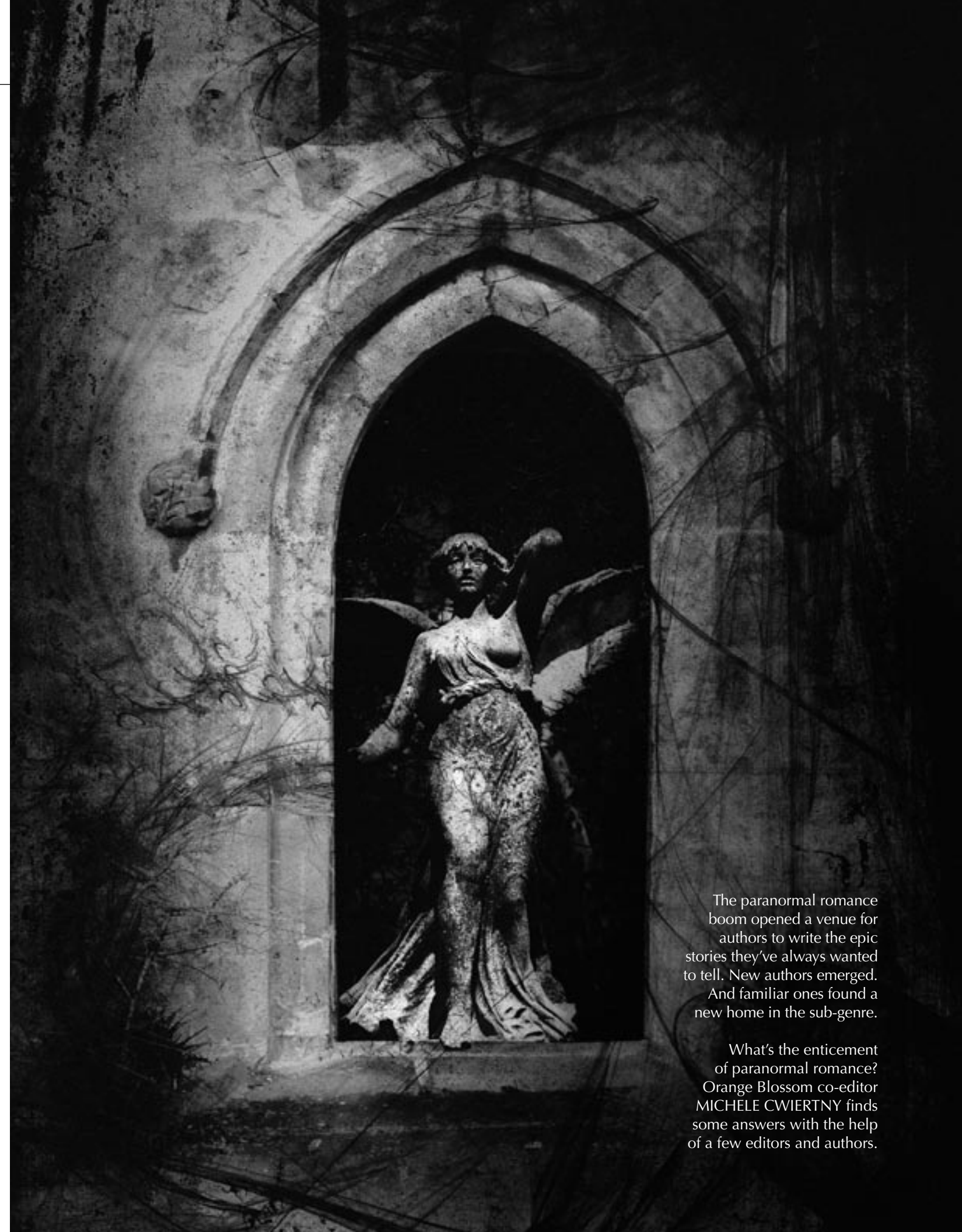
THE ROMANCE

This particular sub-genre seemingly exploded onto the market and it's still going strong. Thus, as a result of its growth, paranormal romance's branches have spread out in many new directions.

That's why it can be confusing trying to figure out in which market your story belongs, especially with Fantasy, Urban Fantasy, and paranormal romance all containing supernatural elements.

For example, even though Chris Marie Green sets her Vampire Babylon trilogy (*Ace*) in a real location, Los Angeles, and she features...well, *vampires*, her stories are better suited to an Urban Fantasy line, rather than a paranormal romance line. "The biggest concern in the books is 'saving the world,'" says Green. "Actually, at first, the heroine's goal is more to save her *own* world until she's exposed to some revelations that change her perception. But the focus isn't on the romance, although the story does contain romantic elements with The Voice and a rival PI/vamp hunter. Additionally, there's a higher level of violence in Vampire Babylon, which, to me, makes it closer to horror than romance.... Lastly, although my vampires are gorgeous, alluring creatures, they're perceived to be the dark force...at least from the point of view of the protagonists at this point."

Abby Zidle, Senior Editor at Pocket Books, also clears up the confusion when asked whether Pocket makes



The paranormal romance boom opened a venue for authors to write the epic stories they've always wanted to tell. New authors emerged. And familiar ones found a new home in the sub-genre.

What's the enticement of paranormal romance? Orange Blossom co-editor MICHELE CWIERTNY finds some answers with the help of a few editors and authors.

a distinction between Fantasy and paranormal romance: “The distinction is largely the presence of a central romantic story, I think; even on the Simon & Schuster website, our paranormal romances are listed under Romance, Fantasy as opposed to Fantasy (which seems to draw more from the traditional SF/F understanding of the term). At heart, paranormal romance must still deliver a substantive, rewarding romance.”

THE HERO

So, how does an author deliver a “substantive, rewarding romance” to the readers? Let’s start with the hero. The soul-stirring tales—the ones readers can’t wait to discuss with their friends—have so much thought put into the backstory created for each character. It’s what brings them to life. But what draws an author to write about a certain type of hero or heroine—a shape-shifter, a demon hunter, or perhaps a witch?

In her *Silhouette Nocturnes*, *Eternally* (11/06), *Nevermore* (2/07), and *Vanished* (6/08), *USA Today* bestselling author Maureen Child chose Immortal Guardians as her heroes. “I loved the idea of an immortal,” says Child. “Someone who could live through centuries. Maybe as writers, we’re more inclined to go to the dark side of things, but when you sit down to think about it, life really is too short. Even if you get eighty, ninety years, there will be things left undone, unsaid.

“But what if you’re an Immortal? What if time doesn’t have the same meaning for you? What if you had all of eternity staring you in the face? On the surface, it sounds like a great deal. Watching the world change, seeing history unfold, having all the time in the world to live and see and do. But you also lose the people you care for, over and over again. How many centuries would it take to make you reclusive? To force you to withdraw from the very world you’re allowed to explore to your heart’s content simply because you *are* Immortal?”

“What does centuries of loss do to a person? How do you handle the knowledge that you will never die—(unless, of course, someone cuts your head off). That idea intrigued me so much that I wanted to explore it further.”

Nalini Singh’s Psy-Changling paranormal romance series (Berkley) has an excellent buzz going as well. Cindy Hwang offers this explanation: “Nalini is fabulous at world-building, and the landscape of her universe is unique—she manages to combine science fiction concepts (the Psy, the Silence protocol and the PsyNet) with more traditional paranormal creatures (changelings, aka shapeshifters) and not only make it work, but make it seem absolutely fresh—not the easiest thing to do! But the world she creates wouldn’t be nearly as memorable if it wasn’t populated with so many fascinating characters—characters like the Psy assassin Judd Lauren, my favorite hero of the year.”

THE MYTHOLOGY

However, it takes more than just powerful characters to grab the readers’ attention.

In Christina Dodd’s paranormal *Darkness Chosen* series, she’s captured the imagination of so many readers with her Varinski/Wilder families’ pact with the Devil. The *New York Times* bestselling author explains how important it is to have a strong, detailed mythology that will carry throughout an entire series.

“A strong mythology gives form to the whole series and drives it toward a goal—in my case, the family is bound to a pact with the devil and one branch of the family is chosen to break it. If they don’t succeed, the consequences are dire to them and to

the world, so all the books are leading up to the one climatic moment in which they succeed or fail. At that same time, the mythology makes it more difficult for a reader to pick up the series in the middle, so each story must be driven by its own story and romance.”

But even if your stories are not intended for a series, it’s equally important to create a strong mythology. In her stand-alone *Silhouette Nocturnes*, Child takes history and gives it her own spin to fit a mythology she’s created. She says, “To believe in your characters, believe in your story, the world you create has got to ring true. Sure, it’s fiction, but it *could* be real. At least, that’s the feeling you need to build.

“Details are a must, really. I’ve got a three-ring binder with important things noted in it, for example: For *Eternally* and *Nevermore*, I’ve got the birth and death dates of my Immortals. I had to know when Queen Isabella ruled and what Spain was like at the time. I had to know which streets in Whitechapel that Saucy Jack preferred. I had to know when Edinburgh castle was attacked in a specific year and just where Queen Mary was at the time.”

And Chris Marie Green created a mythology that spans not just one Vampire Babylon trilogy (www.vampirebabylon.com), but a second one as well. “Basically, I had the story and world structure planned out from the beginning, but the little details were filled in while I wrote the actual chapters. As far as readers discovering the answers regarding the mythology introduced in this first trilogy, they’ll have them by the end of book three. Like *Harry Potter*, it’ll take more than one book to solve all the loose ends. However, there’s going to be a second Vampire Babylon trilogy with a new arc based on the initial mythology, and those questions will be wrapped up by book six....”

THE HISTORY

Yet, creating these epic stories is nothing new to many fiction writers, especially established ones like Dodd who has written 26 historical romances, including a historical paranormal. For her, her newest paranormal series is a natural progression: “*Darkness Chosen* was the series I was born to write, with the intricate language of the historical when the characters talk about the 1000-year-old pact, contrasting with the contemporary world that does not believe in shape-shifters, lost souls, and deals with the devil. It’s more fun than I’ve ever had before, and I’m passionate about the series.”

Child has also written historical romances, as well as historical paranormals, and draws on her experience when writing her paranormals. “Paranormal romances are so much fun to write because you can literally make up the rules of your world. You’re creating either a character or a universe in which *our* rules just don’t apply.

“Historicals are great because the writer gets to actually be a time traveler of sorts. And combining bits of historical in paranormals is just plain fun. It’s really the best of both worlds. Drawing on actual historical figures to play a role in a fictional novel is another way of making your own world seem more real.”

Also, what’s exciting about this particular sub-genre is the variety of time periods available to the readers. So, does this mean that when a story is a paranormal romance, rather than straight historical romance, readers are more willing to accept less popular time periods, or even multiple time periods, as settings?

“I do think readers who like paranormal romance do tend

to like a wide spectrum of settings, story ideas and styles,” says Hwang. “It certainly wouldn’t surprise me if there was a correlation between how adventurous a reader is and how much she enjoys paranormal romance.”

Zidle adds, “If the story’s paranormal elements are strongly grounded, yes, I think you can get away with stepping beyond the traditional Regency/Victorian historical setting. And of course, many paranormal romances have part of their story play out on some sort of spiritual plane as well, which is hardly traditional. That said, I think many paranormal romances still benefit from having a contemporary plotline to provide contrast for the magic elements.”

THE CROSSOVER

Oh, and one glance at the shelves of your local bookstore and you’ll discover more than just dark paranormal romance waiting for your reading pleasure. Let’s not forget the light, witty paranormals, too.

At NAL, Executive Editor Kara Cesare’s authors include dark paranormal romance bestsellers, such as Christina Dodd and J.R. Ward (*The Black Dagger Brotherhood* series), as well as light paranormal authors, such as Michele Bardsley (*Don’t Talk Back to Your Vampire*, 7/07).

When asked whether light paranormals generally have a completely different readership than the dark paranormals, Cesare says, “I’d like to know the answer to this myself.... What I think is great is that the genre spans in tone from very dark and sexy to light and funny so that readers can find many talented authors writing very different stories to choose from to suit their personal tastes.”

Besides her dark paranormal stories for *Silhouette Nocturne*, Maureen Child also writes light paranormals for NAL (*More Than Fiends*, 6/07, and *A Fiend in Need*, 3/08). “Most readers have their favorite kind of genre, of course,” says Child. “I do, too, though I will read absolutely everything I can get my hands on. And I don’t think I’m too different from your average reader. Some days I want the dark and sexy read with a hint of danger and some days I just want to laugh and not have to think about anything.”

And Dodd writes historical romance, romantic suspense, as well as paranormal romance. When she breaks into a different sub-genre, does she find she’s writing for a different readership? “That’s tough to tell, but the letters that I get seem to indicate my historical and contemporary readers are following my name, bless them. Certainly I’m picking up a lot of new paranormal readers, and I hope they’re hitting the backlist as it’s re-released, as well as the new romantic suspenses as they come out.”

THE WRITER

So, with the incredible appeal of paranormal romance, and the competition in the market in general, it takes something extra special for an unpublished writer to “knock the socks off” an editor. But are editors still looking for new authors? Yes!

“I’m always looking for new authors who have fresh and distinctive voices writing in any genre, including paranormal romance,” says Kara Cesare. “I like paranormal series because of their wonderful mixture of intense world building, otherworldly characters, compelling and unique plots, and incredible romances, while leaving room for any original elements or fantasies the author can imagine.”

And Cindy Hwang is known for finding new voices through various means, including fanfic, which is how she found

relatively new authors Meljean Brook and Jean Johnson (*The Sword*, 2/07). “I’m always on the lookout for new voices—it’s one of the parts of being an editor I love the most—the moment of discovery. The difference with Meljean and Jean is that I didn’t necessarily expect to find them, because reading fanfic is a hobby. But it’s always fun and exciting when hobby and work overlap—especially when you least expect it! But yes, I love discovering new voices, whether it’s through fanfic, contests or reading submissions.”

Pocket’s slate of paranormal authors include Shayla Black (*Tempt Me With Darkness*, 9/08), Jennifer St. Giles (*The Lure of the Wolf*, 7/07), and Alexis Morgan (*Redeemed in Darkness*, 11/07).

“At the moment the paranormal authors on my list have already been working in the genre and are working to build their series,” says Abby Zidle. “I’m certainly not opposed to acquiring the next shining paranormal star, but I confess I’m getting a little burned out on the ‘band of magical beings works with humans to save the earth’ paradigm. [...] At the end of the day, good writing trumps all.”

THE MARKET

So, what are some of the publishing houses buying?

Kara Cesare (NAL): “We’re open to all paranormal romances that have an original hook or fresh twist to make them stand out as distinctive.”

Cindy Hwang (Berkley): “I don’t know if there’s anything we feel is missing from the paranormal market—I know we still get plenty of paranormal romance submissions. I do think that there’s a temptation for writers to insert a paranormal element into their story to make it more ‘saleable’—this really doesn’t work and I don’t recommend it. There’s also the danger of the ‘kitchen sink’ approach—of adding too many paranormal elements into a story and not having anything gell properly, all done to make the story stand out. A lot of times, the story will stand out, but not in a good way!”

Abby Zidle (Pocket): Well, we’re a bit vamped- and wolfed-out at the moment. Because the paranormal romance market is getting so crowded, a new author needs to have something unique to break away from the pack. That said, if you can figure out how to do a zombie romance that’s sexy (how *does* one make rotting flesh sexy, anyway?), that would certainly be unusual.”

For more information about what other publishing houses are looking for, be sure to check the Market Update page in the Members Section of the RWA website (www.rwanational.com).

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