

ROMANCE CLICHÉS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

BY CHRISTINA DODD

Need a plot for your next book? Try a fresh take on an old cliché

Xtina sits at her computer, waiting for an idea to strike her, the kind of original, dazzling idea that will make editors line up to buy her and readers pant with anticipation of her newest release. She stares at the blank monitor, at the cursor blinking and blinking, and realizes—she needs to go shopping!

She enters Walmart, and although it looks like she's buying toilet paper, she's really shopping for ideas. Walmart sells everything, and she fruitlessly searches for ideas in the aisle between the dog food and the service desk. Irresistibly, she's drawn to the book department. She rearranges the paperbacks, putting her own books at eye level, and then looks for a deep, intellectual, meaningful read that will spark her creativity.

She browses the Harlequin Presents.

The Billionaire's Pregnant Bride. No. Anything to do with pregnancy or babies gets a pass. The Sheik's Unwilling Mistress. Hot damn! That pushes every politically incorrect button she owns! The Virgin's One Night Stand with a Tycoon. Interesting...Xtina picks it up and reads the back copy. The heroine's fiancé dumped her, and her tycoon boss thoughtfully offered to help her out with a one night stand. What a guy. Xtina flips through the first few pages. The heroine is whiny and guilty. No, no, no! She should be in a magnificent towering rage! Xtina puts that book back.

She looks for some more mind-elevating literature. She wanders into romantic suspense, picks up Stab Me Through My Tender Heart, and reads the back copy. This woman slept



with the wrong guy. He hid his cocaine (or some nefarious thing) in her house, and now horrible stuff is happening to her, and she has to depend on the help of a noble policeman/private detective/FBI agent to get her out of this mess.

But Xtina likes the bad guy! What if the heroine's fiancé dumped her, she picked out a guy to sleep with, and it was a bad guy—and she couldn't get rid of him? The heroine would have just stepped in a huge pile of poo!

As soon as Xtina thinks that one phrase—"the heroine would have just stepped in a huge pile of poo!"—Xtina knows she has a plot. Because that's what Xtina looks for in a plot—a big pile of poo for the characters to step in. She lovingly places The Sheik's Unwilling Mistress into her cart and heads for checkout and home, to her blank, wait-

ing monitor, where she immediately writes down her idea.

I know what you're thinking. Could this story be apocryphal?

No, it's true, except for the part about immediately writing down the idea. I...or, rather, Xtina, first stopped to read *The Sheik's Unwilling Mistress*.

I guess you're also thinking, "But this Xtina chick wanted an original, dazzling idea, and all she got was a couple of clichés twisted together."

Perhaps I was overstating things when I said she wanted an original idea. What Xtina wanted was the kind of story she likes to read—in this case, a story solidly based on a cliché or two.

A Story That Resonates

Clichés exist because they work, over and over again, for a lot of people. To ignore the cliché is to guarantee failure.

Now, there are actually people who don't agree with me. I know, I know. How foolish can you be? But it's true. A lot of writers believe that they are writing an original story. A lot of writers worry someone will steal their plot.

How can that be? Your story has been written hundreds, if not thousands, of times before, and if that's not true, if the plot truly is original, you're not going to sell it, and if you do, no one will read it. Think about it—what makes you buy a book? Realizing it's a story that resonates with you. And how do you know that? You've seen it before. You've heard it before.

What cliché do you love? Amnesia? Secretary/boss? Beauty and the beast? Secret baby? There aren't that many essential romance clichés. As humans, and I think that correctly describes most of us here, we're programmed to want the same story over and over again.

To support my opinion, I did a totally impartial poll...of my friends:

"All popular fiction is essentially predictable," says Jayne Ann Krentz (*Fired Up*).

"Clichéd plots are comfortable and familiar, and they meet readers' expectations. The trick is to take a cliché and put it into your voice, thus making it new and unique." — Emily March (*Angel's Rest*)

"Clichés work, but a writer has to be careful to use them like a little spice and not as the main ingredient. If there are too many clichés, or if there's no twist, the reader has no reason to pick up the book. She's already read that story before, written by someone else." — Susan Mallery (*Almost Perfect*)

"I love you" is a cliché. It may have lost its originality over the years, but put it in the mouth of a man with a Tiffany box in his hand, and originality will not be what comes to mind. Fierce emotion turns any cliché into a pleasure." — Eloisa James (*A Kiss at Midnight*)

"Is Xtina ranting about something again? (Eye roll)" — Teresa Medeiros (*The Devil Wears Plaid*)

Ha, ha, that Teresa! She's such a blond, always hitting "reply all" at the wrong time. But of course I know it's all in fun and would not dream of taking revenge.

Please note that the extremely talented authors of this impartial poll, authors who have published more than 200 books among them, not only agree with me—that we as readers want the same story over and over—but they also say making a cliché successful requires that you make it your own.

Making It Your Own

You knew there was a trick, didn't you? To make a cliché work for you takes a unique voice—yours—and a twist of originality.

A cliché is a cake (follow me here). All cakes are just cakes. But you take the ingredients of the cliché you love, and you play with them. You juggle them. You mash them together, stir them around, and make a cake readers will love. Then, you frost the cake. You use whatever kind of frosting you like, decorate it with sugar roses, candy sprinkles, lemon peel, chocolate curls, whatever works for you. But, at the base, it's still a cake. Yet this is your own distinctive cake, the cake only you can make.

Lisa Kleypas (*Love in the Afternoon*) believes, "A cliché is an opportunity—you can take a familiar archetype, keep what is satisfying about it, but push it to a new level by giving it your own twist or flavor. Remember that there is truth in clichés, and a romance writer's obligation to find emotional truth is far more important than trying to kill a cliché."

To make a cliché work takes a strong grip on its appeal to the romance reading public. How are you going to figure out what that appeal is?

Ask yourself why you're writing that story. What makes it work for *you*?

"Who doesn't love a great amnesia or twin story? Clichés work because every author can put a new spin on a powerful old story to create something fresh and sparkling," says Teresa "Dark Roots" Medeiros.

Clichés exist because they work, over and over again, for a lot of people.

Myth (aka Cliché)

Does it make you uncomfortable to call the basis of your plot a cliché? Okay, we're writers; we all know how to use a thesaurus. Let's not call the basis of our plot a cliché. Let's call it a myth.

I first picked up the idea of popular fiction as myth when I watched the six-part PBS/Bill Moyers interview of Joseph Campbell called *The Power of Myth*. (I highly recommend a viewing, and the companion book is excellent.) Joseph Campbell studied myth throughout the world and discovered universality among the stories regardless of the era and the culture. Greek myths are echoed in Native American myths

are echoed in Chinese myths are echoed in Nordic myths. Humans, no matter where they are born and when they live, want to hear about themes that relate to them, to the challenges in their lives, and the emotions that drive them to succeed or fail, to love or hate.

According to Connie Brockway (*The Golden Season*), “One woman’s cliché is another woman’s mythology, something that reaches us on a sub-language level of understanding.”

Christopher Vogler based his best-selling *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* on Joseph Campbell’s work, using the stages of the hero’s journey to create a story guide for writers. Using movies as its examples, *The Writer’s Journey* is brilliant in its clarity, simplicity, and diversity. Yes, if you don’t already own it, I also highly recommend *The Writer’s Journey*.

“A romance writer’s obligation to find emotional truth is far more important than trying to kill a cliché.”

— Lisa Kleypas

Bring on the Sheiks and Pirates

So, I, or one of my wise friends, have convinced you that clichés—or myths, if that works with your comfort zone—exist because they work, over and over again, for a lot of people. You base your story solidly on a romantic cliché, give it a twist, write it in your voice...and what are you going to do about the fact that the eternal myths, the stories that what humans want to read, are not necessarily politically correct in today’s market?

Okay. I don’t know what *you’re* going to do. But please keep in mind that I’m not only a writer, I’m also a reader. I am the heart of the romance reading market, and I want to read

over-the-top stories filled with nonstop adventure, hot sex, and a man who has pleased a dozen women but only wants the heroine—and he can’t have her! I want books with plot holes big enough to drive a 16-wheeler through, but are written so well I don’t care! I want sheiks—men who ride across the hot desert with their white robes flying, who snatch a woman from her bed and steal her virginity with no notice of what is politically correct! And pirates! Let’s hear it for swashbuckling pirates who ravish women without guilt. I want guys who can do it all night long *without chemical aid*. And I want them to be rich! I want men who inspire adjectives like hotly, sardonically, wetly, and savagely!

I want to see women masquerading as boys while they work for the hero! Sure, I like heroines who are engineers and doctors and CIA operatives, but what happened to the rest of us? I want to read about women who are teachers and secretaries and librarians! Especially librarians! Especially a librarian who starts out timid and, by the end of the book, wins the life she wants, the wealth she wants, the man she wants, and the best sex in the history of the world!

I don’t care what people who don’t read romance think of romance! I have my primal sexual fantasies, and I demand the right to indulge them *in my reading* without bowing to some stupid false values set up by the politically correct police!

So bring on the clichés!



A New York Times bestseller, winner of the Golden Heart and the RITA, and author of 45 books, Christina Dodd continues her series, The Chosen Ones, with Chains of Ice (July 2010/beauty and the beast cliché) and Chains of Fire (September 2010/lost love redeemed cliché.) In April 2011, look for her historical, Taken by the Prince (the sheik cliché). Please join her on Facebook (facebook.com/ChristinaDoddFans) and Twitter (twitter.com/christinadodd) and explore her worlds at www.christinadodd.com. She promises not to use so many exclamation marks.

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