

Deconstructing the business end of contemporary romantic suspense novels ... and today

written by Holly

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By Holly Lisle

Yesterday evening, I went through one of my contemporary suspense research examples (**Mr. Perfect**, by Linda Howard, which I liked) and my examples of sonnets and villainelles suddenly seem much more appropriate. I read and marked it up and found a very definite structure – 3700-word chapters of suspense story (which sets up the heroine and her friends with the villain) alternating with relationship chapters that introduce the heroine to the hero and move them through the stages of their romance, and interspersing a small handful of villain-POV scenes. The hero/heroine romance is connected to the suspense part of the novel exactly at the midpoint, where the first murder occurs.

I'll note that this is not the formula for the contemporary suspense novel – that it is just the structure of this particular novel. It's interesting to run through, though, and note how smoothly this structure moves the story forward when handled well. Interestingly, while there's plenty of sexual tension from the first hero/heroine scene, they don't actually consummate the relationship until 2/3rds of the way through the book.

Of the three contemporary suspense novels I've read in the last three days, this one (which sold the best, by far) has the most clearcut structure if you deconstruct it. It and one other have introduced murder late in the story. There's a fourth sitting on my work table that apparently sold like

gangbusters in spite of the fact that I haven't been able to drag myself ten pages into it. I'm eyeing it today with loathing, reminding myself that I bought the damned thing to read for structure and pacing, and that, whether I think this author ought to have her computer taken away from her and dropped in a river or not, she still sold the book (and a multitude of companion volumes) to publishers and readers. Something about it must have worked. My mission, which I really don't want to accept, is to Find ... What ... Worked. ::gritting teeth:: ::reminding myself that writers learn as much from bad books as from good books, if they're open to the lessons offered::

But this morning, thank God, I don't have to read the Bad Book. I'm doing revisions on the proposal, then writing the last three or four scenes of the outline. This afternoon, I'll work on writing chapter three of my paranormal suspense, and seeing if I can get a few thousand really good words. This evening, ... well, this evening, unfortunately, the Bad Book awaits.

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