

In This Issue:

Spotlight on Mary Jo Putney
Romance: B(u)y the Book
What Makes a Great Hero
Reading About Writing
The Road to Romance

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Spotlight on Mary Jo Putney



Award-winning romance author **Mary Jo Putney** has always appreciated the leap of faith. It has led her down more than one interesting path in her life.

At Syracuse University, for example, English major Putney dated a guy who was in industrial design and decided he was having more fun than she was, so she switched.

"I liked underlying patterns and the excitement of figuring out the right design," she says. "Design is a lot like novel writing. If it's well done, it's invisible."

After graduation, Putney lived in California for several years before spending two years in England as the art director of *The New Internationalist*, which covers social and political issues in developing countries and which she refers to as "left-wing."

"They were great, idealistic people, and it was a fascinating, mind-stretching job." Putney lived in the ancient university town of Oxford and worked in 10th century Wallingford in a 200-year-old house. Each day she drove the winding country roads in a ratty old Morris Minor wagon that had wooden ribs and "creaked like a ship at sea." In the Morris, she explored as much of Britain, Scotland, and Wales as she could.

Those years immersed in British history and culture stood Putney in good stead when she decided to pursue her fantasy of writing and tried her hand at Regency romance.

"I've always liked a good relationship story, and I've always liked a happy ending. The year before I started writing, I discovered Regency romances in the library. I loved Georgette Heyer. I had lived in England, and I had a degree in 18th century British literature, I had a computer, and I thought, let's see what happens."

"The Regency drew me because it's the dawn of the modern era but far enough away to still be glamorous."

Putney's first book sold quickly. Abandoning her design career as soon as she could afford to, she turned to writing full time and has never looked back.

Since 1987, Putney has published 31 books. She has made all of the national bestseller lists, including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and *Publishers Weekly*. Five of her books have been named among the year's top

five romances by *The Library Journal*. *The Spiral Path* and *Stolen Magic* were chosen as among the Top Ten romances of their years by Booklist, published by the American Library Association.

A nine-time finalist for the Romance Writers of America RITA, she has won RITAs for *Dancing on the Wind* and *The Rake and the Reformer* and is on the RWA Honor Roll for bestselling authors. She has been awarded two Romantic Times Career Achievement Awards, four New Jersey Romance Writers (NJRW) Golden Leaf awards, plus the NJRW career achievement award for historical romance. Though most of her books have been historical, she has also published three contemporary romances.

In 2004, Putney once again followed her instincts when she launched her acclaimed Guardian series with *A Kiss of Fate*, the author's first foray into fantasy.

"My concept for the series is to use real history, but with characters who are Guardians, members of ancient families who have great magical powers and who are sworn to do their best to preserve mankind from its worst impulses," Putney says. "Since Guardians are human themselves, they make mistakes, but they do try their best. The tension between duty and love will be a running theme in these stories, and I'm really excited to be writing them."

Putney says she's a lifelong reader of science fiction and fantasy and decided to write romantic fantasy because she felt she needed a change.

"I've always loved science fiction and fantasy," she says. "I can quote whole passages from Robert Heinlein's books. When I came up with a Georgian world that blended fantasy and romance, it all fell into place. Fantasy elements add delicious freshness to classic historical romance settings."

Putney's latest book, *The Marriage Spell*, was released in June 2006 and received 4 ½ stars in [Romantic Times Book Reviews](#). Although it is set in the Regency and is not part of her Guardian series, *The Marriage Spell* also weaves magic into the story's historical tapestry.

Del Rey Books published her second Guardian novel, *Stolen Magic*, under the name M. J. Putney, and the paperback came out in July 2006. The third book in the series, which is built around the early days of the abolition movement in Britain, is scheduled for publication in the summer of 2007.

"I like to have stories that have strong themes so I can get on my soapbox. Our world is so stressed since 9/11. I think that's one reason there are so many magical and fantasy books now. Jo Beverley says she thinks the upsurge in vampire stories is the appeal of immortality in the wake of 9/11."

With Georgette Heyer, Putney lists Dorothy Dunnett, Robert Heinlein, and Mary Stewart as influences on her writing. Who does she read now? Lois McMaster Bujold and Catherine Asaro are two of her favorites.

"I was happy to hear that Dick Francis finally has a new book coming out this fall. He stopped writing for a while after his wife Mary died in 2000."

Does Putney have a favorite among her own books?

"They're all special in their own way. I suppose I'm especially partial to *The Rake*, *One Perfect Rose*, *The Spiral Path*. Every one is unique. It's a relationship. I can't write them if I don't love the characters."

As for her writing day, Mary Jo Putney claims to be "a slug" in the mornings.

"I read the newspaper over breakfast. E-mail gets me to the computer. Errands and exercise are late morning. Sometimes it takes all day to get the creative juices going in the evening. It's amazing I ever finish anything!"

Just as it has altered so much of how people conduct business around the world, the Internet has affected Putney's work. "The Internet is an amazing research tool," she says. "though I still consult a lot of books. The Internet makes it too easy to drown yourself in research, and some of it isn't reliable. I check references, look at other sites. You develop a smell test. As much as I like bound books, you can't be sure they're always right either."

"I read a fascinating book about the telegraph called *The Victorian Internet* [Tom Standage, Berkeley Trade, 1999]. A lot of technological changes that transform the world have to do with communications."

Does Putney ever consider giving up writing for the next challenge?

"I've still got stories to tell. One day I might stop and play with the cats and garden and travel. Writing is hard work. Evelyn Waugh said easy writing makes hard reading, and hard writing makes easy reading. You have to work at it. The better the writing, the harder it is. The absolute passion to write can fade later in a career, but I'll always have my imagination."

Meanwhile, in addition to the third Guardian novel, readers have more Mary Jo Putney books to look forward to next year. In January, NAL will publish *Dangerous to Know*, a volume that will include Putney's first Regency, *The Diabolical Baron*, along with her one Western novella, "Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know." *Dragon Lovers*, her romantic fantasy anthology with fellow authors Jo Beverley, Karen Harbaugh, and Barbara Samuel is due out in the March. The paperback of *The Marriage Spell* will probably also be out in the summer.

According to Putney, the romance genre has diversified enormously over the last twenty years and now has books to suit just about all tastes. Her writing has evolved as well.

"My writing has become tighter and my craftsmanship has improved," she says. "No surprise there since at the beginning, I was writing purely on instinct. But the same themes and kinds of characters still attract me."

"To have a longer career in this business, you have to be able to adapt to shifting currents. It's like the mastodon. You have to adapt or die. Anyone who has had a long career has had to go through a lot of changes."

Adaptability is important, but be careful of chasing the latest hot trend in romance or whatever métier you choose, Putney cautions. It may not be hot anymore by the time you finish your book. Be aware of the market, but remember that your passion for what you're writing is paramount. It's better to create the next trend yourself.

"People who have an instinct for it, who write what they love, can create the next wave," she says. "I've been in the front but not a pioneer. It helps if you have that kind of intuition. You can't control it if you do. You just have to hope it doesn't go away."

"You have to read a lot and find out what you have an affinity for. There's no point in trying to write a mystery if what you love is romance. You're better off doing something that you love, and developing your own unique voice."

"Finding your creativity is important. We need to have something that's not just about the practicalities of life. You take care of the muse, and the muse will take care of you."

Romance: B(u)y the Book



Take an fascination with romance, mix in a background in the formal study of literature, add a dash of zeal for promoting authors, mix well, and you've got book critic Michelle Buonfiglio. She was smitten with the genre at her grocery store's book rack, when she picked up a contemporary romance novel that, she says, "rocked my world."

That first love led to obsession and eventually to [Romance: B\(u\)y the Book](#), her weekly, nationally syndicated literary review of romance fiction that also features author interviews and tidbits about the writing life.

"Part of the reason I created Romance: B(u)y the Book was to help authors—who can be kind of shy—connect with readers," she says. "I'm not working on a novel myself because this project has grown so quickly and is so darn much fun that I've put that way, way on that back burner. I just love writing about romance and hooking up readers and authors."

Buonfiglio writes four features a month, alternating historical and contemporary within as many subcategories of romance as possible. That's four to choose from the hundreds she receives each month. Reviews rate each romance for overall quality, sensuality, and—the favorite here at Scribe—cover cheese. For example, her September 7th review gives Candace Hern's *Just One of Those Flings* 4 1/2 stars overall, 4 hearts for sensuality, and zero cheese wedges for the book's elegant cover.

Each week, she reads 7 to 10 books, beginning to end. How does she decide which books to review from the mountains she receives?

"I choose a book because it's immediately entertaining and the writing tells the story from the first," Buonfiglio says. "The writing must stay consistent throughout. Everything's there for a reason. Nothing—not dialogue, not sensuality, not plot gap—stops the work cold.

"Why do I say the writing 'tells the story' rather than 'the writing is good?' Because sometimes the story is so accessible—makes so much sense, is so engaging, so romantic, so well-plotted, and so on—that the writing doesn't have to be utterly sophisticated to make the thing work. I'm going to tell the viewers about those, too."

Buonfiglio says she often considers a novel that's been sent by an author she's met or one who has contacted her directly.

"They've reached out," she says. "I've never featured a novel for that reason, but it's gutsy and has helped bring some really good ones to my attention.

"It's horrible when I really like someone, but their book isn't right for the column at that time. Mostly, a book doesn't get featured because I think the author can do better. I hope that doesn't sound condescending. I truly understand the heart, sacrifice, and everything that go into writing and getting one's book published."

In addition to her column, Buonfiglio also writes a blog, [Romance: By the Blog](#). Check it out September 18–22 for what she's billing as "Back to School Week," when she'll have scholars from Princeton, Fordham, and DePaul blogging about romance.

What Makes a Great Hero?

Alpha male or beta? Younger or older? Richer or poorer? There's a longstanding debate in the industry on what makes an ideal romance hero. Romance writers wrestle with creating strong heroes that their readers can fall in love with, just as their heroines do.

Scribe asked two of Austin's bestselling romance authors, Julie Ortolon and Julia London, just what makes a hero great. Here's what they had to say.



In fiction, as in life, we admire people for their strengths, but we connect with them through their weaknesses. Whether we love them or revile them depends on how they deal with those weaknesses. In creating a great fictional hero, you have to give him enough larger-than-life strengths to make the story exciting, but you also have to make him vulnerable. It's the vulnerabilities that make readers root for him. And, of course, for tight storytelling, your hero needs to face his greatest fear to win the day.

USA Today bestselling author Julie Ortolon is known for writing contemporary romances that are both humorous and poignant. Catch up with the latest from Julie at www.ortolon.com.



I think a great hero encompasses the best characteristics of man. He's not flawless, but his true and good characteristics shine through his flaws. He is aggressive but kind, powerful but gentle, lustful but reverent, fearless but circumspect. He is a guy's guy but can adapt to any social situation he's put in. He gives as good as he gets from life, is generous to a fault, and wants, in his heart of hearts, to mate for life with one special woman and create a family in his image that will live on long after he is gone. It never hurts if he is handsome and sexy but blissfully ignorant of that fact. And above all, a great hero adores women in all their many forms—fat, thin; tall, short; dark, light; sexy, not so much; bewildered, kick-ass—you name it, if it is woman, he adores her.

Julia London is the New York Times and USA Today best-selling author of historical romance fiction and contemporary romantic comedy. Her next book, *The Perils of Pursuing a Prince*, will be released Spring 2007 from Pocket Books. Visit Julia at www.julialondon.com.

Reading About Writing

Austin's own [Julie Ortolon](#) reminds us that keeping your inner life healthy is as important as polishing your craft.

"There is an endless number of books to help writers learn the craft of writing. If you want to write and stay sane, however, it's mandatory to balance books on craft with books on how to cope with the writing life.

"One book I keep on my night stand like a bible is Dennis Palumbo's *Writing from the Inside Out: Transforming Your Psychological Blocks to Release the Writer Within*. As Gary Shandling says in his cover quote, 'Every writer should have a shrink or this book. The book is cheaper'."

The Road to Romance

Each year, romance fiction accounts for almost 55 percent of all popular mass market fiction sold and almost 40 percent of all fiction period and generates more than \$1 billion (that's billion with a "b") in sales each year. If you're interested in writing romance, take yourself as quickly as possible to [Romance Writers of America](#), one of the most professional writer's organizations on the planet. RWA has 9,500 members (1,600 published in book-length romance fiction) and 144 chapters worldwide, including a chapter right here in [Austin](#).

RWA provides networking and support to writers at every stage of their careers from absolute beginners to multiple *New York Times* bestselling authors. It's a homegrown organization, founded in Houston in 1980 by 37 charter members.

In July 2007, RWA's 27th annual national conference will be just up the road in Dallas. This year's conference in Atlanta offered workshops on everything from how to prop up the sagging middle of your manuscript to how to dispose of a corpse to the ins and outs of publishing. And each year at the national conference, RWA announces the winners of its RITA (for published authors) and Golden Heart (for unpublished authors) Awards, the Oscars of the romance industry that recognize the achievements of writers in almost as many categories as the Academy Awards.