

Writing the Gothic heroine By Karen McCullough

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I like to say that I was Gothic before Gothic was fashionable. As a teenager in the 1960s, I was intrigued by all things paranormal and by all things romantic. So naturally when I discovered Gothic romance novels, I slurped up every one of them I could get my hands on. At the time there were quite a few of them.

When I began writing some years later, it was pretty natural that the novels I wrote had a definite Gothic flavor, even though Gothic was no longer the fashion. If you called them Romantic Suspense, however, that worked. Now that vampires and werewolves are all the rage, a variety of Gothic is back in fashion, though it's more often called either paranormal romance or urban fantasy. Honestly, I don't care what it's called as long as it has those wonderfully eerie elements, a nice touch of romance, and a hero and heroine I can root for.

Much has already been written about the qualities of the Gothic hero—that dark, powerful, attractive, enigmatic and sometimes tortured man who might at first look more like the villain of the story but will eventually show the goodness in his soul. The way the hero is presented can make or break a story for me. But a good heroine is every bit as important as a good hero.

Even back in my teen years when I was grabbing every Gothic romance I could find, much of my reaction to a story depended on the heroine. If she was weak, whiny, silly, or stupid, the book was a failure for me. If she was strong, brave, intelligent and willing to use her brain to help herself out of her predicaments, I was happy.

One of the first Gothic romances I remember reading was Mary Stewart's *MADAM, WILL YOU TALK?* Although it wasn't in all ways a Gothic, it was a romantic suspense novel with a good hero and a splendid heroine. In that book Charity Selborne was a strong and courageous woman who refused to sit around and moan about her problems, and refused to give in without a fight when threatened. In fact, she gave a pretty good account of herself in her clash with the man she thought was a monster.

I hated books where the heroine did stupid things like trusting blindly someone who was clearly untrustworthy, running impetuously into situations where anyone with one good could see the danger, or refusing to call for help when it was needed. Of course, even smart heroines could manage to get themselves into sticky situations as authors like Mary Stewart, Barbara Michaels, and Madeleine Brent demonstrated over and over. In fact, that was the heart of their stories, that even smart women could find themselves in a jam, but smart women also looked for smart ways out of it.

When I sat down to write my first romantic suspense novel, it was important to me that I have a great hero, but also a strong, competent, intelligent heroine. I wanted her to be compassionate and to have a sense of humor as well. On the other hand, I didn't want her to be too perfect, either, so I also made her occasionally impatient and even grouchy. But not much, just enough to keep her human. That first romantic suspense I wrote, titled *A QUESTION OF FIRE*, was published many years ago now. One of things I'm most proud of with that book is how many reviewers mentioned that they loved the heroine. They really liked that she was "funny and smart" as one reviewer put it.

I've gotten the rights to *A QUESTION OF FIRE* back and put it up in a Kindle edition at Amazon. This book is near and dear to my heart since it was the second complete book I ever wrote (the first was a seriously bad science fiction story)...and then rewrote and rewrote and rewrote again before it finally got published. I'm thrilled that it's available again. I also think that Catherine Bennett is the best heroine I've written so far and I want more people to meet her.

[Karen McCullough](#) has written and published nine novels in the romantic suspense, mystery, and fantasy genres and won numerous awards, including an Eppie Award for fantasy. She's also been a four-time Eppie finalist, and a finalist in the Prism, Dream Realm, Rising Star, Lories, Scarlett Letter, and Vixen Awards contests. Her short fiction has appeared in several anthologies and numerous small press publications in the fantasy, science fiction, and romance genres.

Her most recent publication was a Christmas paranormal novella, *VAMPIRE'S CHRISTMAS CAROL*, published by Cerridwen Press in the anthology *BENEATH A CHRISTMAS MOON*. Forthcoming releases include a Gothic novella from Red Rose Publishing, which will be part of the *SHADOWED HEARTS* anthology, and a mystery novel, *AGIFT FOR MURDER*, from Five Star/Gale Group, with hardcover release scheduled for January 2011.

A member of Mystery Writers of America, Romance Writers of America, and the Writers' Group of the Triad, she is currently serving as president of the Southeast Chapter of Mystery Writers of America.

She invites visitors to check out her home on the web at <http://www.kmccullough.com>

A QUESTION OF FIRE: When Catherine Bennett agrees to attend an important party as a favor for her boss, she knows she won't enjoy it, but she doesn't expect to end up holding a dying man in her arms and becoming the recipient of his last message. Bobby Stark has evidence that will prove his younger brother has been framed for arson and murder. He wants that evidence to get to his brother's lawyer, and he tries to tell Cathy where he's hidden it. Unfortunately, he can only manage to give her a cryptic piece of the location before he dies.

The man who killed Bobby saw him talking to her and assumes she knows where the evidence is hidden. He wants it back and he'll do whatever it takes to get it, including following her and trying to kidnap her.

Cathy enlists the aid of attorney Peter Lowell and Danny Stark, Bobby's prickly, difficult younger brother, as well as a handsome private detective to help her find the evidence before the killers do.

