Creative Writing: Thinking about Genres

The Center

A genre is simply a category that contains similarities in form, content, and style. Genres are ways in which we categorize music, movies, literature, and art. Deciding a genre for your short story or novel helps to frame the context that you write it in and helps determine the type of readers you will attract to it.

Many contemporary stories often utilize more than one genre for a story. However, to prevent yours from becoming confusing, decide what genre will be the dominant one of your story. As a general rule of thumb, try to limit your story to no more than two genres.

Science Fiction (Sci-Fi)

Science fiction stories often deal with mankind’s relationship with the abnormalities in nature, the boundaries beyond nature, or with technology. There is usually a crisis that begs readers to question who or what is in control. There is also usually a question about whether or not humanity triumphs or falls to an unpredictable world or forces greater than what is known.

Science fiction stories can feature a crisis between man versus machines; is man alone in the universe or are there other intelligent life forms to learn from or fight against; man’s encounter with the paranormal; man versus a dependence on technology; technology developing its own awareness; nature rebelling against mankind; or a world ruined by nature, technology, or the paranormal and how man should (or could) survive in it.

Fantasy

Fantasy is often linked to science fiction, but as a genre, it has its own distinction. Fantasy stories can contain imaginary planets, worlds, universes, dimensions, and time periods. You can develop the creatures, the beings, and even the languages to populate these realms. Remember, even if the world in your novel does not actually exist, write it in such a way to where readers will wonder if it is possible for your short story or novel to occur somewhere in the unknown parts of the universe. You never know!
Horror

Do you want to scare the heck out of someone? Do you want to rattle your audience with murder or mayhem? Do you think about a monster who stalks his prey at night but walks among people in broad daylight? Horror stories are meant to unnerve, scare, or disturb readers.

Some of the most effective horror novels are the ones where the actions take place off of the page. The writer may write about screams heard in the distance but the readers never see the actual action written on the pages. Horror stories can be gruesome and even gory, but sometimes the horror does not come from a monster. It could come from the unsuspected neighbor next door. Real horror can spring from the people or places you would never think had a dark side.

Romance

Love is in the air, or is it? Romance is not always about the main character obtaining true love. Sometimes romance stories can focus on heart break, a long lost love that reappears but the relationship fails, or the one true love that got away. Keep in mind that all romance does not end in happily ever after.

Suspense/Thriller

Suspense/Thrillers are the stories that can cause you to hold your breath! They create a sense of excitement, anticipation, or tension as readers wonder what will happen at the very end. Suspense/Thrillers are often linked to mysteries because they contain a dilemma that needs to be solved within a specific amount of time. What happens when time is up? What happens when the clock strikes midnight? Write a story where readers are not only holding on to it, but they are also holding on to the edge of their seats!

Mystery

Mystery stories are the “who did it” classics where characters hide and exchange clues in a case or question that needs solving. The beauty of a well-crafted mystery is that you can cast a shadow of doubt on all the characters involved. In the end, you want to surprise your readers about who has been the mastermind behind the unsolved story all along.

Western

A Western tends to be a specific genre in terms of setting and characters. Most Westerns will contain your classic cowboys, outlaws or villains, agricultural
The western genre tends to center on a few basic themes. Your story can focus on how your characters resist or welcome the coming age and how it threatens or sustains the simpler ways of life on the range. It can also focus on more social issues such as conflicts between settlers and natives, rights over land boundaries, or the positive and negative effects of your characters’ behaviors as they deal with cultural differences. It can even focus on property ownership and the culture of ranching, herding, or farming and its contrast to industrialization.

A western can often leave your audience reading about a time gone by. Even though there is a pretty specific expectation of what readers anticipate from this genre, there is room to experiment with other concepts such as a modern day western or even a western set in an imaginary location.

In the end, choose the genre that is most fitting to the story that you are writing and write a compelling story that you would want to read, even if your audience is an audience of one!