

So Much More Than Just a ‘Love Interest’

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Definition of the term ‘love interest’ from Oxford Learners Dictionary:

- A character in a film or story who has a romantic role, often as the main character’s partner.

First, I hate the term ‘love interest’ because for me, it usually applies to a female character whose purpose is mainly window dressing, almost like a mannequin that walks and talks but doesn’t do much more than that. She’s an ‘object of desire’, but in reality, she doesn’t have an active role in a story unless she’s in a romance novel or a really good movie like I’ll cite in the following piece here.

There are a million and one romance novels I could cite as blowing this crappy ‘love interest’ trope all to hell but instead, I’m going to use a series of movies because it’s easier to reference a movie and for you to find it somewhere on the streaming services if you haven’t seen the movies in discussion here.

So let’s get started with the ‘love interest’ trope of the weepy-wife and unrequited love interest of the hero.

In 2002, I sat down to watch the movie ‘Proof of Life’ with Russell Crowe and Meg Ryan. In the film, the husband of Meg Ryan’s character is kidnapped by rebels in a South American country and Russell Crowe’s character is sent in by her husband’s company to negotiate his release (instead, he facilitates his rescue). Now in the film those two characters don’t get together (though in the novelization they did have a one-night stand). But all she does really is just sit around and talk, look pretty, but in reality she really doesn’t do a lot more than that. She doesn’t participate in the negotiations, and doesn’t make too many demands for answers. She’s just sitting there waiting for her husband to come back while the hero makes goo-goo eyes at her. In the end, her husband is rescued by the hero and she is reunited with hubby and we end the movie with the hero all alone.

As I watched the movie, my romance-writer was kicking in hard because all I could think was this would be a much-more emotionally engaging story if instead of a husband being kidnapped, it would be her brother instead. And yes, I will freely admit I wanted these two characters to get together but also because I felt it would have raised the stakes and do something different than just having a weepy wife sitting around waiting for her husband to come home. Mainly, it was an unrequited love story and I hate those and still do.

Well, after the movie was over my mother asked me what I thought about it. I

hesitated because it looked like she enjoyed the movie. But in a moment of honesty, I told her my thoughts as I outlined in the previous paragraph. Then she said, “Sometimes I hate watching movies with you.” Because yes, dear readers, I’d done this before. But then right after she said that she told me, “But your idea is so much better.”

I never really talked about my writing with my mom or how I came up with stories and things like that (and that is a story for another time and place). But to get her seal of approval meant so much to me. So much so that the very next day I sat down at my little Brother Word Processor, put in a fresh three-and-a-half by five-inch floppy disk (this little word processor had no memory so everything had to be saved on those little disks), and I wrote what would become the first chapter of the novel I’ve been working on ever since titled ‘Not Enough Time’. And in that book, my heroine Laura, has a HUGE stake in the plot and story, and is on an equal footing with my hero Jake.

Now the ‘love interest’ trope as I will now refer to it is used to create a ‘love triangle’, where a woman comes between two men. But she’s just the woman they want to, well, fuck, and one falls in love with her. Two films that show this are ‘Against All Odds’ and ‘Tequila Sunrise’. In ‘Against All Odds’, the ending doesn’t get the couple together and in ‘Tequila Sunrise’, the couple that get together hopefully will work it out. But in both films the woman doesn’t really do anything to drive the plot, solve the mystery, or really do nothing but look good and make the guys go nuts over her.

In ‘Against All Odds’, which is a remake of an old forties movie called ‘Out of the Past’, the main lead character is a football player named Terry played by Jeff Bridges. He’s been injured and he’s trying to come back but he’s also in trouble money-wise until an old friend of his asks him to go to Mexico to find his girlfriend who has run off with his money. Well, through kind of sort of dumb luck, Terry finds the girlfriend and they bang and fall in love. Then she reveals that she did steal her boyfriend’s money and if I remember correctly, boyfriend gets killed but girlfriend decided not to go off with Terry. But her stealing the money didn’t quite make sense because she had a trust fund she could live off of. And it seemed like she couldn’t take care of herself and was just sitting around looking pretty, which is why the guys were gaga over her but the ending felt like crap to me because she didn’t stand up to her rich-bitch family and go off with Terry in the end though she was supposedly in love with him.

In ‘Tequila Sunrise’, Mel Gibson plays a former drug dealer who gets pulled back into drug dealing and in turn gets caught up in his old friend’s investigation of a

big drug deal going down. The old friend, played by Kurt Russell, is tailing Mel Gibson's character to a high-end Italian restaurant run by the character played by Michelle Pfeiffer. First, Kurt gets with her and they bang then she finds out that he was just sort of using her to get close to his buddy and she dumps him. Then she hooks up with Mel's character and they bang and in the end they get together. But, she has no connection to the drug deal going down or to the real baddie that Kurt Russell's character is after (by the way, the big baddie was played by the late great Raul Julia who was, as always, awesome). She doesn't ask too many questions or really try to figure out if she wants to be a part of this crazy shit or get the hell out.

Like 'Proof of Life', I've been wanting to write something in the vein of both films, 'Against All Odds' and 'Tequila Sunrise' and maybe someday I'll be able to pull it together. Mainly in my untitled story, the heroine I have kicking around in my head is a big part of the plot, doesn't just stand around looking gorgeous, and most of all, if I dumped her out of the story the whole thing would fall apart. Because if you take out the heroine in both films, you still have a story that would be just a slight cut above a grudge match between two egocentric dudes. It's always been like that when the woman becomes the motivation for them to do more than just solve crimes or some shit like that.

It doesn't work for me to have a female lead character who is just an object of lust that turns into the 'love interest'. And yes, maybe this is my romance-novelist brain coming to life but it was stuff like this that made romance novels such a revelation for me and really showed me the types of stories I wanted to write. Because in my stories, no female main character is a 'love interest', or an 'object of desire', or worst of all, 'arm candy' or pardon the blunt ugliness, 'fuck mate'.

So, having come this far you might be asking, how do I avoid having a story critiqued like I just did with the above films? How do I avoid making my lead female character anything but a 'love interest' or again, pardon the crudeness, 'sex object'?

First, don't put a female character front and center and have her just be an 'object of desire'. Don't just put her onscreen or on the page just to look good, have men lust after her, or just be the one they turn to and have sex with.

Second, don't push her aside for a male character to take over. Don't take her decision making away from her and have her always defer to the male lead like some good little robot-Stepford wife type.

Third, give her a role in the story, make her a driver of the plot, and give her own character arc. Give her own thoughts and feelings, and motivations and conflicts on equal footing with the male lead.

Do I have any examples of this I can share to show how this could work?

I have two very different ones but both exemplify the female lead character as an equal to the male lead and an equal driver of the plot while having their own character arc and conflicts to navigate, too.

First up is ‘The Terminator’. The movie starts in a post-apocalyptic future after a nuclear war started by an AI system called Skynet almost wiped out humanity. The survivors wage a new war against machines created to hunt them down called ‘Terminators’. Then the film goes back to 1984 where we meet Sarah Connor, a young waitress who is just trying to get through the day. But unknown to Sarah at first, a Terminator from the future has been sent back in time to kill her. In a crowded nightclub, Sarah is almost blown away by the Terminator when she’s rescued by Kyle Reese, a survivor from the future sent back in time by her son (not yet born and she’s not even pregnant at this time) to protect her. Reese scares the shit out of her even as he fights like hell to protect her. But in a moment of calm, Sarah opens her heart to Reese and he reveals the reason he came back in time: he was in love with Sarah and in one night as Sarah says at the end of the movie, they loved enough for a lifetime. Unfortunately, the Terminator finds them and in a final showdown Reese is killed and Sarah finally kills the Terminator. At the very end, we see Sarah now-pregnant with her son (yes, fathered by Kyle Reese), and telling her son what he’ll need to know in the future.

In this movie, Sarah may look like she just starts out as a pretty object, a damsel in distress. She has no real self-confidence and just can’t believe she’ll become this ‘mother of resistance’ that Reese keeps talking about. But she begins to learn how to fight when Reese shows her how to make homemade pipe bombs and at the climatic battle when Reese is mortally wounded, she drags him to his feet yelling, “On your feet, Solider!”. So by the end of the film, she is on her way to becoming the ‘mother of the resistance’ but also carrying around a huge truckload of trauma and a broken heart. But she is the heart of the story and that’s why I love this movie so much in addition to all its’ other brilliance.

The other film I feel really shows what you can do with a female lead character not becoming an ‘object of desire’ or just pushed aside is another movie from the 1980’s called ‘Compromising Positions’. It stars Susan Sarandon as a former

journalist turned housewife named Judith, living in an upper middle-class suburb on Long Island, New York. When her dentist is murdered, and she was the last one to see him alive, she starts investigating and runs into Detective Suarez, played by the awesome and magnetic Raul Julia. At first, Detective Suarez sees Judith as a potential suspect, then meddling in his investigation. But eventually they team up and work together to solve the case. Now, there is considerable chemistry between Judith and Detective Suarez but they don't act on it (unlike in the book the movie was based on where they did and my mom and I both agreed that was a major 'ick' thing).

Judith is not just bored, but she wants to be a journalist again and yes, she does think this murder case might be a ticket back to her old job. But what I like about her is that she gives her husband a chance to reconnect with her and isn't unfaithful to him though if she wasn't tempted I'd eat my hat. And Detective Suarez begins to realize that Judith can get to people he can't and get information he can't since he's a cop so they do figure out a way to work together. Basically, you can have cool characters with chemistry who don't sleep with each other yet make a great team and a great movie.

So to wrap this up, let me go over the following points:

Don't make a lead female character nothing but a clothes hanger, or a sex object, or just someone to say stuff and move around in scenes. Make her a driver of the plot alongside your male lead and other characters and not from the backseat either- put her right up there front and center.

Give her thoughts and feelings, conflicts, and her own character arc. Don't make her perfect, and don't make her a flat-out villainous bitch either. A woman can be smart, and say and do stupid shit sometimes. She can also be blunt to the point of crudeness without being hammered for it.

Most of all, women get shit done. And women have been getting shit done since the beginning of human evolution. And for god sakes, this is the twenty-first century and if you have a problem with women not wanting to take shit for not being a silent blow-up sex doll, sit down and shut the fuck up then ask yourself why you feel that way about women. Because in this day and age, sexism and misogyny like all other forms of prejudice and racism and all that bullshit are NOT to be tolerated or accepted anymore. We can do better and we have done so before and can continue to do it now.

Women sure as hell deserve better, even in fiction.