
Bad Boy Romances

Biker Boys and Mobster Royalty

Laurel Tarulli

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There is no question that the romance genre continues to grow in popularity. In part, this is because romance writers have been quick to explore new avenues for their stories. Here, column editor Laurel Tarulli takes a look at one of the newest trends in romance fiction: bad boy romances. While there have always been some dodgy romance heroes, Tarulli notes the rapid rise of bikers and Mafiosi as romance leads. Tarulli discusses the elements of this increasingly popular subgenre of romance and offers the readers' advisor some sound advice on working with romance readers.—Barry Trott, RUSQ editor

In 2015, Mary K. Chelton wrote an article for this column called *Readers' Advisory: There Seem to Be More SEALs in Romance Fiction Than in the US Navy, and If So, Why Does It Matter?* I remember when Chelton and I discussed the idea for the article, considering the wildly popular *Fifty Shades* phenomenon among readers, and this subtle shift of a powerful alpha male into the world of SEALs. During that time, we saw an increase in romances featuring “good guy” alpha males, who were often military men or involved in law enforcement and had a strong moral or ethical code—even if the female characters challenged their chivalry!

Over the Christmas 2016 holiday, I decided to escape into some romance, and started exploring what was new or popular in the genre. Were SEALs romances still enjoying the same popularity, or was there something new to explore? For me, romance is my way of escaping from the everyday YA and children's materials that I focus on at work. To my delight, I noticed a new and growing subgenre exploding onto the scene: bad boy romances. These bad boy romances fascinated me because the bad boy in question is almost always likeable and has a soft spot that the reader can't help swoon over.

In particular, over the past couple of years, there has been growth in the publication and popularity of biker gangs and mafia romance. And I'll admit, I'm a sucker for a strong, Italian alpha male. It's not a new subgenre, but I can't recall when it has ever been this popular. And, fortunately for me, I *had* to read a variety of these books for this column, to see what was new or different about them. But even if romance isn't your preference, it's interesting to note the presence of this subgenre, and the variety that is offered. More about that in a minute. First, I wanted to know if my hunch was true, and if this subgenre really was enjoying a newfound popularity.

Looking at the publication dates of bad boy romances, it appears that they first started showing up significantly in

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2013, with a marked increase in 2015 and 2016. Bad boy romance enjoyed an extremely successful year in 2016, with an abundant number of titles published. With the number of new titles set to be published this year, the popularity of this subgenre doesn't seem to be slowing down.

BAD BOY POPULARITY

I have a very good friend who works as the primary fiction processor for our local public library. Since the cataloguing and processing department is a centralized service for approximately fourteen branches, she often knows as much as frontline staff, if not more, about what's happening in circulation. As an experienced processor and an avid reader, she touches more books in the system than any subject cataloguer or purchaser. This gives her insight into what's new, what's trending, what needs replacement, or what's being phased out or discarded. I value her input when negotiating purchasing choices and identifying themes. So, on one of our frequent get-togethers, our conversation naturally led to books and what we've been reading. I decided to ask my friend what she's observed regarding patron reading habits, and if she's seen an increase in romance novels focusing on the mafia and biker gangs. As it turns out, she has seen a marked increase, with many more making their way across her desk than ever before. Indeed, if you search the various library catalogues, you'll notice holds on these romances, not only on the ones already available for borrowing, but on the latest titles.

In fact, the authors have been clever in building a following. Most of these romances are written as stand-alone books within series. These series are focused on stories within a specific mafia family, location, or ethnic group (Italian mafia, Russian mafia, etc.). The biker gang books fall under the umbrella of the gang in question, often first exploring a variety of romances within one gang where characters are related, and then subtly shifting to another series of books branching off to a rival biker gang. This can hook a reader into reading eight, ten, or more books by the same author, with all of the stories and characters interrelated. And yet, many of the books are written to be approachable: if you don't want to invest in all of the books, you can read one as a stand-alone and not feel as though you've missed too much of the story.

What's also notable is their availability in e-book formats. In addition to the hard copy publications that are *also* being sold digitally, many romance novels are being published as e-books only. These offer the advantage of allowing individuals to explore their reading indulgences without the paperback's tell-tale romance cover illustration. They also offer the convenience of obtaining the next book in a series with the click of a button.

But, why are these books gaining such popularity? What sets them apart? They give readers what they look for in a variety of ways: romance, suspense, danger, factual

information and history on the inner workings of the mafia and biker gangs, and yes, even erotica.

THEMES AND STORY LINES

La Cosa Nostra and Biker Gangs

When I settled in to read my first mafia romance, I must admit, my expectations weren't high. I thought I was in for a light romance in the usual formula with characters in a mafia environment. While I did run into the usual formulaic romance publications, I also found myself drawn into the mafia world and La Cosa Nostra ("this thing of ours"). Many of the Italian mafia romances focus on La Cosa Nostra and the inner workings of the mafia. There are descriptions of the hierarchy of La Familia ("the family") and how men become "made men." In many of the romances, the male characters have more depth than I've experienced in other romance subgenres, and the authors take their time exploring the inner workings of the organizations as well as the characters within them. They don't shy away from describing the brutality of the organizations, and they recognize the conflict that a man or family struggles with in being a part of them. In many of the better-written mafia romances, we see the man's struggle to separate his family from his mafia family, and the strife born from expectations about tradition and violence. In many ways, this is what snagged me. I must admit, the romances had me seeking out books and documentaries on the actual organizations and personal stories of true mafia members.

There are definite parallels between biker gang romances and mafia romances. Many readers might be inclined to separate these two subgenres, and while it can be argued their characters and general feel offer a somewhat different experience, there are many similarities beyond the "bad boy" theme. My colleagues and I have talked about biker gangs being portrayed as a brotherhood, with similar expectations of loyalty, trust, respect, and duty placed on the male character. In the biker gang romances, there is also an introduction to violence and, in some cases, the legitimate business of these organizations that still attract unsavory characters. Through it all, we again experience the characteristics of a well-developed male character.

This is especially significant because these romances deal with real-life issues. Domestic violence, gangs, trust, respect, and honor are just some of the values and struggles readers face in their everyday lives. Indeed, it is easy to paint the figure of the biker or mafioso as a caricature, sometimes even as a monster, without acknowledging that the real-life counterparts of their organizations involve actual men, women, and families. It's intriguing how authors of this subgenre explore the humanity within these organizations (with, of course, the freedom to fictionalize them, making them easier to love!). While there is often a happy ending, it is not always without some personal loss, death, or shift in a character's development.

Genres within the Subgenre

Bad boy romances are often lumped in with dark romance or erotica, but that isn't always the case. In some ways, this genre is so varied that navigating it is not easy, because the only common themes are "bad boys," romance, and bad language. The other content and story lines vary widely, from extremely violent and containing erotica, to tales full of suspense, romance, and mild bedroom scenes.

Exploring the publication of these genres, and specifically the mafia romances, I noticed that many of the authors were male. What attracted me to these romance novels—and author W. S. Greer does this especially well—was the experience the reader has not only with the characters but with the life of the organization itself. Two of Greer's mafia romances, *Kingpin* and *Long Live the King*, demonstrate how a man becomes absorbed into the mafia and its way of life, whether it is through friends or family. However, they also allow the reader to glimpse the less glamorous side of this world, where your life is always at risk and violence is accepted as normal. It reveals the changes that newer members try to enact and the strength of the traditional mindset within these organizations. These novels have made Greer an international bestselling author, and they're not his only mafia romances.

In many of the publications in this subgenre, male authors tend to provide more suspense and insight into the organizations and how they function, without losing the romance and yes, even the bedroom scenes. The depth of the male characters is also stronger, perhaps because the author is male. The stories also tend to take place over a longer period of time. Sometimes, the stories start out when both main characters are young, and we are taken with them through their life experiences before settling into the main plot.

However, women authors are no less valuable in their contributions. The majority of these titles are written by women and they certainly don't lack in quality. The bedroom scenes and language tend to be more intense, and specific "series" tend to have more installments. The authors include many characters who are woven together so that they can re-introduce them in later books. Like the male authors I've read, these authors also provide some insight into these organizations, although not with the same depth. I've found that women tend to focus more on the characters, emotions, and events within the story. One of the first authors that comes to mind in the mafia romance subgenre is Michelle St. James. She has written a series of books, broken into trilogies, that let the reader experience the mafia, as well as a touch of law enforcement.

Biker Boys vs. Mafia Royalty

While the similarities between these bad boy romances have been discussed, it is important to note some very different characteristics. Not all readers will enjoy both the biker gang romances and the mafia romances. And indeed, even in the mafia romances, there will be preferences based on ethnicity

or age—Italian vs. Russian mafia, soldiers vs. bosses, and young love vs. mature relationships.

In the Italian mafia romances, I noticed the refinement and emphasis on tradition. The books are chock full of nice cars, impeccably dressed men, excellent food, and beautiful homes. In biker gang romances, the men are grittier and rougher and the settings are far more unpolished and tangible. There are backyard barbecues, beer, and television channel surfing. Yes, stereotypes are evident throughout! This is noteworthy, as one experience might speak to or resonate with a reader more closely. And that in itself is something to discover in a readers' advisory interview. If an earthy, roadside bar or a grittier lifestyle is what a reader is used to, that reader may very well want to escape into a mafia romance. Or, it might be easier for the reader to become immersed in story of a biker gang romance, because it is more familiar.

No matter who the male character is, coarse language abounds. If hard-core swearing is a turnoff to a reader, I would hesitate to recommend this subgenre. You can't escape the male characters' dirty mouths, and may find an Italian mafia boss mixing Italian endearments with the dirtier side of our English language. However, between the two, the biker gang romances contain language that might be much more offensive to sensitive readers; this must be remembered.

So, why would these alpha males attract our readers? Even with their dirty mouths, they're prone to moments of tenderness that attract our human nature. They harbor hidden weaknesses that they slowly reveal to the women they fall in love with. Sometimes, the key is in the description of a glance, a hesitation, or a touch that is expressed even in an environment that isn't romanticized or glamorized. The reader is moved by the male character's struggles with duty, loyalty, and respect. And, how many romance readers don't want their heartstrings tugged by a bad boy who can be redeemed? Or if not redeemed, then made captivating by a tantalizing glimpse of softness and distinguished by their fierce protection of those they love?

Biker Chicks v. Mafia Princesses

The female characters in this subgenre are no less interesting. While I cheekily use the term "biker chicks," the women introduced in the biker gang romances can vary from a sweet artist and baker to a feisty young woman who is just trying to find out who she is and what she wants. There are also women who suffer from extreme abuse and become stronger, not because of the bad boy, but because they have been written as strong and tenacious. Michelle St. James's mafia romance series includes a female protagonist who is one of the bosses; a confident, beautiful, strong, competent, and extremely intelligent woman. In others, the females are innocents in a crime family in which they have no knowledge. While a reader can find an innocent, meek female character in some of these books, many of the female protagonists in this subgenre are strong and independent and need to be so in order to deal with their alpha male counterpart.

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In almost all of these romances, the story is told by both the female and male characters, offering distinct perspectives on the same situation and providing opportunities for all of the characters to be developed more fully.

CONCLUSION

The romance book industry is a large one, and keeping up on trends as a romance reader can be difficult. If you're not a romance reader yourself, it can be even more difficult to navigate and understand what the differences are between the subgenres! This genre can also present significant problems with our readers because the readership is so varied. Romance fans can be grandmothers, teens, mature adults, professionals, and everything in between. And, as with all large genres, romance is not one-size-fits-all. In fact, romance novels can present an even trickier issue because of the wide range of content found within the subgenres. It's

easy to offend sensibilities or shock a reader if we suggest a book that doesn't fit the reader's tastes. But I think we face this struggle on a daily basis.

My hope in writing this article isn't simply to write "another romance genre piece" but to demonstrate that this shift in romance should be noted on two levels. As with the law enforcement and military subgenres, we are dealing with alpha males who demonstrate strong loyalty, respect, and a sense of duty, albeit while participating in not-so-legal activities. But these two subgenres can also be a starting point for readers to learn more about real-world biker gangs and La Cosa Nostra. If we find readers who are enjoying the titles which explore the inner workings of these organizations, this opens a variety of opportunities for us to find other books, in the romance, suspense, and narrative non-fiction genres, that may capture readers. The possibilities are there, as we explore the increasing popularity of these two genres and the biker boys and mafia princes who bring these stories to life.