

Creating a happy marriage is possible and this site is dedicated to providing resources to help couples who want to stay together. By providing information about qualified marriage counseling, we hope to encourage couples to get the help they need. The site also features articles, other websites, books, and workshops which offer the tools needed to create happy, lasting marriages.



A Romance Writer's Guide to Marriage

This is Episode number 56 of Stay Happily Married, "A Romance Writer's Guide to Marriage."

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- Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here in the studio with Sonja Foust. Am I pronouncing it right?
- Sonja Foust: Yep
- Lee Rosen: Good. Okay. She is, thankfully, a happily married romance writer from Durham, North Carolina, who has been writing novels for about five years. Welcome to the show Sonja. I'm glad you could join us today.
- Sonja Foust: Thank you.
- Lee Rosen: Let me ask you, so you're a romance novel writer. How many novels in the last five years? What have you got out there?
- Sonja Foust: How many have I written? Well, I've written a lot more than I've sold.
- Lee Rosen: Is that how it works? Okay.
- Sonja Foust: Yeah, usually. As far as full length novels, I think I just finished with my fifth one. And I've sold a couple of short stories too, so it's not all novels.

Lee Rosen: So what is -- I mean, I have my ideas about what a romance novel really is but I've never actually read one. So what is a romance novel, exactly? What does that mean?

Sonja Foust: A romance novel -- there are actually a lot of subgenres within the romance genre. So you can get a lot of different things in a romance novel; it just kind of depends what you're looking for. The rules for a romance novel, it has to have a happy ending and the hero and heroine have to be the ones who end up living happily ever after. But that's pretty much the only rule.

So within that you can go a lot different directions. So you can have an adventure, you can have a historical, you can have a contemporary. There are so many different things in the romance field.

Lee Rosen: Well, I have this vision of lots of sex scenes involving knights in shining armor. I mean, am I way off base with that?

Sonja Foust: You can get a romance novel with lots of sex and knights --

Lee Rosen: Oh, good.

Sonja Foust: -- if that's your thing. But as far as the heat level, there are a lot of different levels that you can get to on there as well. There are some that are really just sweet and don't have any sex to speak of. And there are some that fall more into the erotic category, so are way on the other end of the spectrum. So you can get whatever you want in between.

Lee Rosen: Get the whole range. What are yours called? What are the titles?

Sonja Foust: I have two short stories out with the Wild Rose Press. One is called "Love in Shadow" and one is called "Cat in the Mist."

Lee Rosen: Okay. And where do you stand on the wild sex spectrum of romance novels?

Sonja Foust: I suppose I'm kind of in the middle, I would say. If you're familiar with romance at all, I write category romance which falls pretty much right in the middle.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. So you've been married how long now?

Sonja Foust: It'll be five years coming up.

Lee Rosen: So what does your husband think of having a romance writer as a wife?

Sonja Foust: You know, I think he was kind of just bemused at first, really. Just, "Whatever you want to do, honey. That's fine with me." But I think that he thinks it's kind of neat that I have a few fans and that sort of thing. So he's kind of impressed by that. He's not much of a reader so I'm not sure that the writing thing is really a big deal to him. But he's supportive.

Lee Rosen: Well, as you hit the big leagues of romance writing and publishing and all that, I think he'll sort of be on the spot. People will know he was your inspiration for some of this stuff. That's got to be a little stressful I would think for him.

Sonja Foust: You know, it may be. I'm not sure if he's ever thought of it quite that way before.

Lee Rosen: He hasn't thought through the -- right. Suddenly he's the guy they're all looking at.

Well, let me ask you this. How do you know what will -- I assume your audience is primarily women, yes?

Sonja Foust: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So how do you know what appeals to your audience? How do you know what's romantic? How have you figured out what those ideas ought to be in your stories?

Sonja Foust: Well, part of the scary thing about being a writer is you never really know what's going to appeal and sometimes it's not going to appeal to everybody.

So kind of a scary thing about writing is just being able to put yourself out there and kind of share with people what's romantic to you and what you really identify with. So you never really know. But I think people are very empathetic and naturally people will relate to you if you put yourself out there. So you just have to kind of go for it and see what you get.

Lee Rosen: Do you get much feedback from the folks that read your stuff?

Sonja Foust: A little bit. You know, I think everybody thinks that authors are all just inundated with fan mail. We're not. We get all thrilled when we get fan mail.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, I don't think I've ever -- I mean, I read a lot of books and I don't think I've ever written a letter to the author.

Sonja Foust: Right. Exactly.

Lee Rosen: You want to read the book but you don't really want to write a letter.

Sonja Foust: Yeah. So we get a little feedback, probably mostly from reviews as opposed to fans. So we do get a little feedback. A lot of it is more on whether they liked the topic or something like that. So we do get some feedback.

The feedback I've gotten that was most helpful to me is what people identify with in my stories. So I find that the things that people identify with are the things that they've experienced themselves.

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes sense. Well, speaking of experiences, how has being married -- you said you've been married for five years now. How does that affect your writing and your thinking about the whole genre of romance novels?

Sonja Foust: Well, I've had the experience of falling in love with my husband and with living in a good, loving relationship, so of course that helps. But when you're writing a romance novel you're often writing about a woman who is either coming off a really bad relationship or maybe has never loved anybody or has never found love. So you have to kind of step out of yourself a little bit and put yourself in the shoes of another character. But that's what writers love to do, so it's fun.

Lee Rosen: Right. You get to have multiple lives going on in your head, I guess, all of the time.

Sonja Foust: Exactly. Yeah.

Lee Rosen: That is kind of neat. So do you find yourself including the -- does your own marriage come out in your writing? Do you find that happening?

Sonja Foust: It does sometimes. I wouldn't say exact events will be in the book or anything like that, but the feelings that you get when somebody does something for you that just really makes you happy, all those types of things are experience that does go into what I write.

Lee Rosen: You know how there's this idea that people are -- we talk about this with marriages that don't work. There are some people who are really infatuated at the beginning of their relationship and if that

changes they feel like, well, they're falling out of love. They don't think about this concept, I guess, of love maturing or changing over time or all of that.

In your world do you -- I mean, I haven't read a lot of romance novels, but I sort of have this assumption that that infatuation continues a lot in these books, that that's part of what -- is that a fair assessment or does the love mature in romance novels in the same way that it needs to in real life?

Sonja Foust: It does mature in romance novels, actually, and I think a lot of people would be surprised to find that. You do get the falling in love because, I mean, who would want to read a book where people don't fall in love? That's why I read romance novels. So you do get the falling in love piece.

But romance novels always have this thing that we call "the big black moment" where everything just kind of bubbles up and becomes this huge moment of horribleness. And the hero and the heroine have to get over this moment when they think there is no way possible that they're going to make their relationship work. And they have to get through that together and they have to grow together and get past that to make it to their happily ever after.

So they do grow throughout a romance novel and I think that's what we have to do in real life too. I think that's a good thing for us to take away from something like a romance novel is when we hit our big black moment in real life the thing to do is to work through it, and not to just throw up our hands and give up. And when we come out the other side, we're stronger for it.

Lee Rosen: So it's not the fault of romance novelists that people have this idea about staying infatuated. You guys don't take the blame for that?

Sonja Foust: Well, I won't speak for everyone, but I won't take the blame for it.

Lee Rosen: Okay. But it does sound like you really are modeling a mature idea of a long-term relationship in the book. So it makes sense. And it does sound -- not that I read anything sophisticated. I just read John Grisham books or something. But I think we have stereotypes of what we imagine romance novels are about. It doesn't really sound like that's the whole story.

Sonja Foust: Oh, definitely.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Very interesting. Do you find in the novels that the things that -- well, what I really want to get at is what do women want? I mean,

that's really my fundamental question. And I feel like you're in a unique position to know because as guys, in a sense we're selling what women want. We're always trying to get positive reinforcement. But you're, like, in the marketplace. If you don't give women what they want, no one buys your stuff. And so let me cut right to the chase. What the heck do they want?

Sonja Foust: Well, I think a lot of times people think that they want big, gallant gestures, these big fairytale things -- two dozen roses or whatever that you can think of that's just this giant gesture. And I don't think that's really what women want. And a lot of what we put in romance novels is just the little things. Maybe the hero is nice to the heroine's grandma, or something like that; or the heroine cooks the hero dinner or something. Just these small gestures that show something important about the relationship, something about how they care for one another, rather than just these big, sweeping things that we often think about when we think about romance.

Lee Rosen: The little stuff matters.

Sonja Foust: The little stuff.

Lee Rosen: Well, in a way that's good because, like, the price of two dozen roses is ridiculous. But in a way it's easier to do the two dozen roses than to be, like, nice all the time.

Sonja Foust: I think it is. Yeah. I think it's harder to do the consistent little nice things. And part of that is that we need to see it in the other person when they actually do those things. I think a lot of times we take for granted -- or we start to take for granted -- the things that our partner does for us. So if you kind of lose sight of those things that made you fall in love with the person in the first place, then you don't often see those little things because maybe you're thinking about the other annoying things that they're doing instead, or something like that.

So I think it's on both people to keep doing the small things but also to keep noticing the small things.

Lee Rosen: Right. That positive reinforcement I guess keeps it happening back and forth, keeps it in motion. That's very interesting.

Let me ask you this. Are there things that get the biggest reaction, the best reaction or feedback from your readers? Are there things in your work that you stick it in there and, ka-boom, these are the things that people really latch onto?

Sonja Foust: I think dynamics between the characters are the things that people are the most interested in. So I'll give you an example. My first short story that I sold, "Love in Shadow," is about a fairy and it's set in a fantasy world. So you wouldn't think there would be that much to identify with. I mean, it's a world that we're not familiar with at all.

But in the story the heroine has trouble relating to her love interest's family members. And people just really latched onto that, I think because a lot of people had experienced that. And in the story they just hated her for things that she couldn't control and I think people just felt so much emotion behind that because a lot of people had experienced that themselves.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I hear you. Are there things that you see that we could really work -- is there a way for us to work sort of more of a romantic flare into our marriages? Like in my life, and I'm sure in everybody who's listening lives, we're busy going to work, picking up kids, buying groceries, watching TV, day after day. I mean, our lives are just kind of -- a little dull at times, but just doing what we do. How do we make it more romantic? Is that possible?

Sonja Foust: I think it is. And it's never going to be the same as it is in a book or a movie. I mean, we don't write about shopping for groceries and doing laundry because it's boring. Nobody wants to read about that.

Lee Rosen: Then I put the Tide in the machine.

Sonja Foust: Right. Exactly. So nobody wants to read about that. But I mean, these are things that you have to do. So a big goal for me is contentment. And I think that a lot of people are always striving for something more, and that's good, but you have to also be content with where you are and you have to be content with having to do those boring, day-to-day things sometimes. And then when you have those lovely romantic moments, even the small ones, you have to kind of grab onto those and just really enjoy them and really make the most of them.

And there's something to be said for the occasional gallant gesture. If you really want to pump up some romance with something easy, buy movie tickets or something. There's something to be said I think still for big gestures. But don't let those little gestures go by either.

Lee Rosen: Right. It sounds like that's a big theme with you. And it sounds like you've really learned that from your audience, from your market, that the little stuff makes a huge difference. As I listen to you, that

sounds like one of the most important lessons, but unfortunately one of the hardest things to keep at the forefront of your mind as you kind of go through day after day of dealing with all those trivial -- laundry and everything else that we talked about.

Is it possible to set expectations in a relationship that are too high, either for us or for our spouses?

Sonja Foust: Yeah, I think it really is. And I think a lot of people do it. And so maybe you're sitting over here thinking, "I wish that my spouse would do A, B, and C; and they used to and they don't anymore." Or you think that if you don't do these big, huge, romantic things that nobody's going to love you, or however you're thinking that. And I think to some extent we get that message a little bit from the media, maybe from books and movies and things like that, but a lot I think it's because we judge ourselves so harshly and we judge other people that way as well sometimes.

So I do think it's possible, yes, to put expectations on ourselves and on our spouses that are unreasonable.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Valid point. I think a lot of us probably have expectations that just don't match up with reality and we end up disappointed.

Let me ask you this now. You've been a romance writer for quite some time now and you've really lived in this world of thinking about what the folks that read your work want. And I guess you're really looking at the human experience, especially for the types of people that read your work.

What's the one theme that really jumps out at you that you've learned? What's at the top of the list of things that you think would help to improve romance, improve the appreciation that you have of your spouse? What have you really learned from being a romance novelist?

Sonja Foust: Well, I think the one thing that I would say is to be sure to use your words. When we write, we put everything in words. And when we're writing a romance novel, dialogue is so important because often times the hero and the heroine, the way they get in trouble in the first place is by not telling each other how they feel. So when they start to tell each other how they feel, well, then at least we know we're on the same page and at least we know -- now that we both love each other we can work through this big, huge problem that we've having.

And I think a lot of times we just don't even think to say to our partner in words, "I love you." The actions are there maybe, but if we don't hear it in words it's not real somehow. So I think to keep saying that stuff is so important and maybe to say -- if you think your wife looks great, tell her she looks great. If you really appreciate that thing that your husband did for you the other night, tell him. I think a lot of times we just don't say those things. And if we don't say them, you're the only person who's experiencing it; you're not experiencing it together.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, it's funny because what I'm hearing is a lot emphasis on communication. And this is episode number 56 of Stay Happily Married and so we're over a year of doing these shows and I will tell you that I don't believe we've yet had an episode where the expert didn't emphasize communication. So your message sounds consistent. AND it's like, gosh, why is that so hard?

But I do -- I pay attention to it now in my house because I'm doing these shows. And you realize even if you want to communicate, even if you know you should communicate, there is just so little time in our days. It's amazing. I read a study somewhere about how few minutes the average husband and wife actually speak to one another in a day. It's kind of mind-boggling.

So your messages, it sounds like, are pay attention to the little things; maybe make the big romantic gesture, can't hurt; and communicate, tell what's going on with you and make sure you're listening to what's going on with your spouse.

Sonja Foust: Right. And I think those things are really important elements in a romance novel too and I think that they sort of -- life and fiction sort of mirror each other in that way.

Lee Rosen: Right. So in your books -- and this is good news for us thinking about how to stay happily married -- your books always end with a happy ending. You said that at the beginning.

Sonja Foust: They do.

Lee Rosen: So that's what we're shooting for at Stay Happily Married. So that's good. We're on the same page. So it sounds like you're going to be an inspiration for everyone that wants to stay married. We should go out and read more romance novels; it just makes sense.

Sonja Foust: You should, I think.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Well, I appreciate you coming by and joining us. It's been wonderful. And I do think -- we have so many folks come in and talk that have experience in the trenches with marriage counseling or financial counseling. But you really come to this with a unique perspective that I think in a lot of ways is very insightful. And I think it's helpful for people to have a chance to listen to you. So thanks so much for being here.

Sonja Foust: Thank you for inviting me.

Lee Rosen: Let me just tell folks about your website. It's SonjaFoust.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. And you will find links to her latest books as well as her blog, which is always interesting, entertaining stuff. So I would encourage you to check it out.

You're on Twitter and that's actually -- we didn't mention this at the outset, but that's how we know each other is from Twitter. What's your Twitter name?

Sonja Foust: It's Sonja_Foust. And go ahead and follow me. I think Twitter's great fun and I have a good time with it.

Lee Rosen: Are you romantic on Twitter?

Sonja Foust: No, not so much. I try to keep it a little -- on an even keel on Twitter.

Lee Rosen: I hear you. But that's how we met, at Twitter. I'm at Twitter.com/LeeRosen. So follow us both and you'll find out what we're up to, aside from talking about staying married.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime, we really appreciate your feedback and your comments. The comments that you give us are just tremendously helpful in terms of setting the agenda for future shows and helping us to make these shows better.

So if you would, I would appreciate it if you'd keep doing what you've been doing. Keep calling. Keep e-mailing. The phone number for calling into the comment line is (919) 256-3083. You can also e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. We'd really love to hear from you, so don't hesitate to give us a call or shoot us an e-mail.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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