
There Seem to be More SEALs in Romance Fiction than in the US Navy, and if so, Why Does it Matter?

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Few of us are lucky enough to write about what we love. In particular, what we love to read *and* why it's so popular. But, Mary K. Chelton was able to do just that. We, the readers of this column are able to dive right into this article and read Chelton's thoughts on a book genre dear to her: Navy SEALs. Why we do love our military men? What is it with the strong, handsome type that often need "fixing" by intelligent, beautiful ladies in need of love that has our readers so transfixed? Chelton provides excellent insight into a genre that she, too, loves to read. In her own words, Chelton states that this article suggests reasons for popularity of military romance, from the type of hero and appeal factors to familiar story lines and authors. Whether you're a readers' advisor familiar with this reading trend, or new to the genre, this article is a great introduction or "go to" resource in your everyday RA world.—*Editor*

Readers' advisors often have problems identifying and suggesting titles for readers from subgenres of larger genre categories like romance or thriller or mystery, especially if they are unfamiliar with the overall genre's components and appeal variations, or with reader expectations. Since one of the hottest current trends in contemporary romance fiction is military romances, particularly those featuring SEALs, this article suggests reasons for their popularity, from the type of hero and appeal factors to familiar story lines and authors.

While there have been various types of military heroes in romance fiction since Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, their current popularity in contemporary romances has created a distinct and thriving subgenre,¹ dominated by Navy SEALs, followed by Marines, Rangers, and Delta Force members. Even romantic suspense stories with private security contractors like Maya Banks' KGI (Kelly Group International) series or Cindy Girard's BOI (Black Operations International) series or Julie Ann Walker's BKI (Black Knights and Deep Six) series inevitably include ex-SEALS.

THE HEROES

Military romances usually feature alpha male action heroes, the most popular type of romance hero. These are smart, hypermasculinized, honorable, heterosexual men who are in good shape physically, good with a gun, and good in bed. They are the quintessential alpha males, or what might be called by scholars of masculinity studies "representations of hegemonic masculinity."² Readers who like Jane Austen and

Georgette Heyer historicals, or readers who like suspense and thrillers might be able to make the transition to contemporary romances that feature modern representations of the military hero/alpha male. Also these heroes are perennially appealing as “men in uniform,” as a recent Harlequin promotion captured in a roundup of sexy law enforcement heroes.³

Alpha males are the rough, hard-edged, often tormented heroes at the heart of the vast majority of bestselling romance novels. They present a challenge to the heroine because the hero's strength is seen as a measure of her power as a woman to conquer him. He provides both the central seduction fantasy of the story in his courtship of the heroine as well as the male suitor's perspective on the growing relationship.⁴

The recurrent SEAL character in the romantic suspense end of the military romance spectrum, is generally depicted as a testosterone-laden, commitment phobic, smart, handsome “bad-ass” accomplished lover with six (or eight)-pack abs who is attracted to, protective of, and supportive but not controlling of, smart women heroines. The book covers inevitably show a “ripped” male torso from waist to the lower face. The description of the SEAL alpha hero in romances is particularly important because of the idealized masculine and heroic attributes he embodies, especially as experienced through the eyes of the heroine:

Jake was dressed in a light blue short-sleeve shirt, tan chinos and loafer. Even twenty feet away, she could tell he was a SEAL. He carried himself with a well-earned confidence, his shoulders back, his gaze always roving slowly around an area, checking it out. His black hair gleamed, indicating he'd probably just taken a shower. There was no question, he was a damned good-looking man. He was in control, powerful and intense.⁵

Military heroes, whether SEALs or not, embody the characteristics many contemporary romance readers want; however, they are embellished to meet fictional expectations. As romance author Tina Waincott says, “Losing her nephew, a Marine, in the war made her realize that our military men are the perfect heroes. Not only during the war but afterward as they try to stitch their lives and souls together once they're home.”⁶ Besides being depicted as gorgeous, protective, intelligent, able to take control, with a sense of humor, they are very good in bed, since most of these books are very sexy.⁷ “They promise strength, safety and military grade sex.”⁸ As one *Cosmopolitan* columnist so aptly describes their internal GPS systems:

They're highly trained in narrowing in on targets, finding objects in demolished buildings and even underwater, and tracing down pretty damn un-track-downable enemies. This is appealing for two reasons. They'll never ask for directions—because they don't have to. And if SEALs can find a terrorist who has eluded capture for 10 years, we're pretty confident they can also find a clitoris.⁹

In fact, many romance fans feel that beyond any reference to world events, the changing roles of women's lives alone demand the larger than life heroes exemplified by SEALs. When such heroes finally fall in love and recognize the feeling—usually when the woman is in some sort of peril (thus perpetuating the damsel-in-distress trope common in romances), it gives the reader the literary and emotional satisfaction of watching a gigantic redwood fall.

SEAL alpha heroes might also be considered popular culture representations of the Jungian warrior archetype,¹⁰ whose appeal is explained by romance author, librarian, and scholar of romance, Jayne Ann Krentz:

Genre fiction draws its power from the ancient heroic archetypes, not modern angst. A lot of modern literature is informed by the social theories of the 20th century—theories of psychology, our understanding of social problems—a lot of modern literature's built on that, and romance can have those themes going on and those problems going on, because they are a part of our real world, but the difference with a genre novel is that in any genre novel, including romance, the hero and the heroine overcome their problems not with social engineering and not with psychology, but with core heroic virtues and they're always the same. It's courage, determination, a sense of honor, integrity, and the ability to love, and that's at the core of all our heroic archetypes.¹¹

EVOLUTION OF THE MILITARY ROMANCE

The contemporary military romance phenomenon seems to have started, not as many surmise, with the SEAL takedown of Osama Bin Laden in 2011, but with romance author Eileen Nauman, known as “Lindsay McKenna,” whose *Captive of Fate* in 1983 is claimed to be the book that “created the military romance,” although her hero was not a SEAL.

A suggestion to author Suzanne Brockmann from a friend in 1995 to read about SEAL training ultimately led to her SEAL Team 10 and SEAL Team 16 books. Her research highlighted their use of stealth and being able to slip into a location unnoticed; their tight bonds with teammates; the fact that SEALs are alpha males who prefer to take action, they are in topnotch physical shape, highly intelligent and top scholars, intensely motivated and highly driven. She (and subsequent authors) then used these characteristics to make her SEAL heroes suffer in various ways, for example, by being forced to be passive in *Prince Joe*, being separated from the team in *Forever Blue*, getting injured so it is impossible to remain on active duty in *Frisco's Kid*, etc.¹²

Other authors have been extending these situations in their stories, imitating her and capitalizing on the audience she created ever since. One of the most recent iterations is a bundled ten-story e-book compilation called *Hot Alpha SEALs Military Romance Megaset* edited by Sharon Hamilton

While neither Brockmann nor Hamilton is in the military, nor is one of the most successful recent authors of the genre—M. L. Buchman, whose *Night Stalker* series about Black Hawk helicopter crews has garnered feminist praise for strong women characters, the military romance subgenre includes other authors with more personal military experience. Merline Lovelace, for example, is a retired Air Force officer, and Jessica Scott is a former Army lieutenant; Catherine Mann an Air Force wife; Anne Elizabeth the wife of a retired SEAL, and both Marliiss Melton and Marilyn Pappano are wives of retired Naval officers.

WHY MILITARY HEROES? WHY SEALs?

Beyond the psychological satisfaction for readers of watching big, bad, ripped SEALs fall in love, and the demands of genre plot conventions that must provide an empowered heroine something big and bad to conquer, the question remains of why the military warrior archetype and a stereotypic representation of hegemonic masculinity resonates within the most female-gendered of all literary genres. For those who feel romance fiction is anti-feminist, it is easy to suggest that the objectification of men is logical for such novels, but whether romances are anti-feminist or not is highly contested by both scholars and fans of the genre.¹³ They are generally considered to be women's empowerment stories told from the woman's point of view. As the Romance Writers of America puts it, "In romance novels, the heroine always wins."

The increasing focus of romance novels on military heroes, taking their cues from the headlines, has increased along with the number of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. There is also a feeling among editors that readers, influenced by the recession, have a rekindled interest in "a rugged workingman ideal." "Women are seeing these men who fight for the love of their country and to protect their families," says Gina Wachtel, associate publisher at Bantam Doubleday Dell. "All women are looking for that, particularly those in problematic relationships. It's like a lifeboat. These heroes promise strength, safety and military-grade sex." However, "while these heroes have an everyman air, they're strictly 1 percent in the context of their profession. The soldiers aren't regular grunts; they're SEALs and Special Forces."¹⁴

The soldier has long been a heroic image of masculinity. Despite current public discontent with war and military leaders similar to that following Vietnam, since the September 11th attacks, public attitudes toward the military have been nearly universally positive, and the military's prestige remains high.¹⁵ As Gerzon pointed out more than twenty years ago:

[The Soldier] was the protector, the man who made the difference between survival and annihilation . . . the man who defended his loved ones and the entire

community. He symbolized security. He was the man who did not hide from danger, who did not give in to fear. The Soldier was willing to risk his own life in order to protect those he loved. . . . He symbolized strength, courage, responsibility. He was the man who inspired other men to act bravely, who rallied a community and enabled its members to defend their sovereignty. In virtually every cultural system, the Soldier was a hero because without him, that system could not endure.¹⁶

This could be a description of any of the military heroes in romance novels. As Cindy Hwang, vice president and executive editor of Berkley Books, says, commenting that romances featuring military or ex-military characters and themes have been popular for years. "Not only is there just something about a man in uniform, but the military is full of heroes who have dedicated their lives to serving their country. Military men and women exemplify what readers want in their romantic heroes: bravery, loyalty, strength, and the willingness to make extreme sacrifices."¹⁷

It is important to note that the military's prestige remains high, with 78 percent of US adults reporting in 2013 that "members of the armed services contribute 'a lot' to society's well-being, and the military still tops the list of occupational groups the public says contribute a lot to society,"¹⁸ so beyond the conventional demands of the romance genre, romance novel readership may already be predisposed to like military heroes by being part of the public whose opinion is favorable to the military.

Another appealing aspect of military heroes is the depiction of comradery among the warriors, where loyalty to the team is as if they were family, and in some instances, such as Stephanie Tyler's *Hard to Hold* series, the team actually is family. Gibson, in *Warrior Dreams*, says that, "The brotherhood of war thus brings men together in ways that efface their individuality."¹⁹ He might have also been discussing Suzanne Brockmann's *Tall, Dark and Dangerous SEAL Team Ten* stories.

Higate and Hopton state that

The nexus linking war, militarism, and masculinities has remained an enduring and consistent feature of societies and their cultures across time. . . . In light of the recent military action by the United States and allies against Iraq, there has been a regression to traditional gender roles, with men cast as the protectors and women as the protected.²⁰

Both of these roles are common in romance fiction.

CONCLUSION

Besides the character and dramatic plot-driven appeal of the warrior hero in military romances for hardcore romance

READERS' ADVISORY

readers, the stories offer a crossover appeal for suspense and action thriller readers that can be exploited by knowledgeable readers advisors, if they can get potential genre crossover readers beyond the scantily clad torso covers. Other parts of the subgenre, like Jessica Scott's coming home stories, offer less action and excitement and a more bittersweet, emotionally intense or heart wrenching tone. Librarians must be careful to note which part of the subgenre they are dealing with, because of these different emotional appeal variations. Also, the suspense stories are usually sexual "scorchers" in *Romantic Times* terms; whereas the homecoming stories are softer and sweeter.

For traditional romance readers, though, there are many arguments to support the theory that romances are not anti-feminist and that women readers can distinguish between reality and fantasy. However, one cannot ignore the fact that the fantasy SEALS in many contemporary romance novels represent the embodiment of heterosexual masculinity. This representation prevails despite the work and education of the heroines depicted in the same books. Ultimately, these smart contemporary women need protecting and rescuing, and who better to do it than SEALS. The fairy tale damsel-in-distress trope is so powerful and enduring in romance novels that it is often difficult to remember that when the romance heroine gets the big bad SEAL in touch with his feelings, she is "rescuing" him as well.²¹ Unfortunately, this is viewed by many as formulaic and sexist, with the quandary stated by Sevick:

Is there a way to write a fun, cheesy romance that isn't problematic? Is there a way to appeal to all that awful internalized sexism that makes us fabulously independent women still want to be swept away by a possessive billionaire barbarian—without reinforcing the worst elements of that very fantasy?²²

Perhaps for contemporary romance readers, SEALS being among the most elite warriors in the armed forces makes them analogous to the lords who populate historical romances. Instead of the social class elitism those alpha heroes exhibit (a la Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*), SEALS exhibit the elite stature of competence and heroism longed for in modern life. They are the "possessive billionaire barbarians" of many of today's romance reader fantasies. Serving up some SEAL romances to their avid readers and potential crossover readers should be one of the many activities that makes adult readers advising satisfying at both ends of the interaction.

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