

We Each Are Responsible for the Image of Romance

by Stephanie Bond

A couple of years ago I was asked to sit on a Romance Writers of America committee to study and suggest ways to improve the image of romance—not the image of the RWA organization, but the image of the romance genre as a whole. The idea behind the committee was to widen the readership for romance by combating some of the damaging clichés that were established in the infancy of the genre, and furthered by the media and/or persons who aren't supporters of the genre. But strangely enough, when the committee identified the audience for our message, the group at the top of the list was...us: the writers of romance novels!

I agree that romance authors are sometimes guilty of fostering cliché's that prevent the genre from garnering the respect it deserves, both by actively participating or encouraging negative clichés, and by being in a position to but not correcting persons who denigrate the genre. Are you an ambassador for the romance genre? You might ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you have a 15-second commercial on the positive effect of your books/the genre?
- Do you have an appropriate comeback for someone who belittles you and/or the books you write?
- Do you send thank you notes to reporters whose coverage of the industry is positive?
- Likewise, do you send professional notes of rebuttal to reporters whose coverage of the industry is less than positive?
- Do you resist putting yourself in positions that can be exploited or misconstrued? (A photographer once came to my home with an assignment sheet for a photo to accompany an article that suggested I pose on the bed in a negligee—a suggestion which I nixed, pronto, and gave the man a 10-minute introduction to the clout and diversity of the books and the people who write them. He wound up taking a picture of me at my computer with my MBA diploma hanging in the background.)
- Do you have a professional publicity photo? (Veteran author Maggie Osborne still cringes when she talks about a regrettable decision, early in her career, to have her picture taken in a bubble bath, a picture which haunted her for years afterward!)
- Do you use event props that expose you, your books, and the genre to ridicule, such as feather boas, tiaras, and life-size cutouts of bare-chested men? (And if you do for the sake of entertaining your readers, do you make a point to clarify to the press that while everyone loves a good-looking bare-chested guy, the good-looking bare-chested guys in our books are also intelligent, kind, well-employed, and monogamous?)

(continued)

We Each Are Responsible for the Image of Romance (page 2)

by Stephanie Bond

- And finally, do you put down other genres, such as science fiction, horror, graphic novels, or even literary fiction? One of the first steps in earning respect for our genre is to show respect for all fields of writing.

As romance novelists, we walk a fine line between wanting to provide a “fun” experience for our readers at events while presenting a professional image to booksellers and to the media. When you schedule events or develop marketing materials (such as designing your website), consider the audience, consider the impression you want to make, and consider the impact that each of us has on the acceptance and expansion of our genre. Remember: We each are responsible for the image of romance. ~SBond