

## EVOKING EMOTION IN FICTION

By Dr. Lin Stepp

Emotion is a critical element of romantic fiction. Romance stories without emotion are flat and stale. It is emotion and feeling that grab us, that capture our attention, and pull us wholeheartedly into a novel. What makes emotion so powerful is that it is a response of the whole organism. For example ... imagine that you're walking through a dark parking lot and you think you hear footsteps behind you. Your heart begins to pound, your pace quickens, your breathing escalates, and you begin to sweat. You feel nervous, anxious, and fearful all at once. There is a full body response to the building emotion. Emotion involves many factors. The dictionary defines emotion as "agitation of the passions or sensibilities often involving physiological changes."

Your job, as a writer, is to draw your readers into the subtle and obvious emotions of the characters in your story. You have to make the reader feel what your character feels. This engages the reader in the action of the story. This makes the characters vibrant and vital. Emotion makes the writing sing.

Despite all the diversity within cultures throughout the world – basic emotions are universal to all. Even with language barriers, a smile, a laugh, a frown, or an angry face are universally recognized. Researchers have actually isolated about twelve basic emotions common to all humankind – love, joy, surprise, anger, sadness, interest-excitement, fear, guilt, disgust, shame, contempt, and pride.

What makes emotions fascinating is how differently everyone expresses them. What enrages one person may only mildly annoy another. What delights and captivates one individual may bore and disinterest another. We are all unique. Each person has their own individual aspects of temperament and personality – in the same way that they have distinctly different appearances. Just as each individual has a one-of-a-kind fingerprint, they have a one-of-a-kind emotional makeup.

The writer's job in good romantic fiction is to make the reader "see" and "feel" the characters in the book – and to see and feel the scene. Past painting a physical portrait of the person and setting, this means painting an emotional portrait. As readers "watch" characters act and respond to their world within the novel, the portrait of their emotional type is revealed. Readers come to know – and often to identify with – a book's characters in this way.

As a creative writer, you are the artist who must paint the mood, atmosphere, actions, and emotions of your story. What makes great books live on, according to Lee Wyndham – who wrote over 50 successful books and hundreds of short stories and articles – is a book's appeal to vital human emotions and its genuine portrayal of people and their feelings. According to Wyndham, "any book or story that leaves the reader unmoved is not likely to be a success."

So ... how can you dramatize and reveal emotion? How can you craft your romantic fiction to show rich emotional feeling? Here are some ideas:

(1) Watch and observe emotion in others. Train yourself to observe how others express emotion – how they look, what they do, what they say.

(2) Remember your own past experiences. Draw on emotional feelings you have experienced from situations you have personally been involved in.

(3) Read and notice how other skillful authors reveal emotion. Note how they create scenes and involve their readers wholly into the feeling of their story.

(4) Strive for empathetic writing – so the reader can enter into the emotions of your characters and feel as they feel. You want them involved, not just observing.

(5) Plan and craft your characters in advance so you know their emotional traits and know how you want the reader to feel about them. Be consistent in how your characters respond emotionally throughout your story.

(6) Demonstrate the emotions of your characters artfully through effective dialog, thoughts, and descriptive action and reaction.

Often the freshness of emotion is lost with over-analysis. Write freely as you enter into your scenes; let spontaneity take over. Free your imagination and ideas. Enter into your characters and dramas. The emotion will flow into your work as you create. The time to critique and edit come later – in retrospect. Often you will be amazed at what emerges from your work when you simply release yourself – and your characters – to perform. In a sense, every writer is a dramatist, and the goal of the dramatist is to grab the attention of the audience, involve and immerse them in the drama, and keep their heart and attention until the story is told. Creating and evoking good emotion throughout the drama draws the reader to live in the romantic novel you create – and to hate to say goodbye when it ends.