

Fiction Sub-Genres: A Type of a Type of Genre!

It's extremely common for stories to be labeled as one genre, yet having elements of another—which is really what sub-genres are. For example, a Fantasy novel is labeled with the sub-genre of Dark Fantasy because it contains elements of Horror; or a Romance is labeled a Fantasy Romance because it contains elements of Fantasy. Read the descriptions below to see how many of these sub-genres get their characteristics from other genres.

When trying to determine the genre of a particular book yourself, look at the 1) events of the plot, 2) setting, 3) characters, and 4) theme, then compare those to the descriptions below. Some of these features may stand out and place the book in one genre better than another.



Sub-Genres of Fantasy

Contemporary or Modern Fantasy takes place in our modern world, but is slightly tweaked so that magic works or where supernatural creatures (such as elves, pixies, or demons) coexist with humans. The magic can be either subtle or so common that people run into it around every corner. The plots often explore modern day issues and all the different creatures bring interesting perspectives. It allows readers to see our society through different eyes. Piers Anthony's stories are a good example of contemporary fantasy.

Anthropomorphic is a fantasy featuring animals with human characteristics. Brian Jacques's *Redwall* series is a good example.

Arthurian Fantasy encompasses stories about King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, Merlin, etc.

Comic Fantasy are tales designed specifically as spoofs of other serious fantasies, or containing humorous elements for a light-hearted tale.

Dark Fantasy encompasses the nastier, grimmer side of fantasy and includes the nightmarish, darker side of magic, creatures, evil and demons, etc. Similar to supernatural horror, it can feature werewolves, vampires, and demons in a world so brutal that it might be horror, except for the fantastic elements that stand out which classify it as a fantasy.

Epic Fantasy is generally tales of a young nobody thrown unexpectedly into a massive "Good vs. Evil" struggle, where he must go on a quest to accomplish feats that will save the day – and the entire world is at stake. The quest may be going on a hunt for a person, a magical talisman, or any other form of symbolic token that will help him along the way. Usually involves a very large cast of characters and spans a vast area in its setting. Storylines are often written to encompass three or more books. J.R.R. Tolkien is the father of this sub-genre with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

Heroic Fantasy Heroes are generally muscle-bound, sword-wielding types, determined to rescue a damsel in distress. The setting has an almost 'middle-ages' feel, peopled with wizards and sorcerers communing with dragons and riding pet unicorns to tame a battalion of wild goblins. The storyline is more focused on the character of the hero rather than the action that takes place.

High Fantasy is the type of fantasy that most people expect when they think of the fantasy genre. Includes lords and ladies, medieval styles and settings, kingdoms and castles, and dragons and knights. It's generally rooted in classical mythology and medieval European legends and focuses its themes on good vs. evil.

Historical Fantasy is the use of magic in a historical setting. It's the same as Contemporary Fantasy, but uses historical events and people of the past and adds fantasy. Examples may be a setting of Cleopatra's Egypt where magic or the Egyptian gods exist, or a setting of World War II-era London where wizards exist, or a story taking place during the Salem Witch Trials with actual witches and witchcraft. Authors of this genre do a lot of historical research to bring their stories and characters to life.

Magic Realism Stories where magic is an accepted part of life. There must always be consequences to the use of magic, and often involves some form of 'prop' to get the magic working, like an amulet, potion, talisman or incantation. A plot where the use of magic and the nasty consequences that come it would be an example.

Sword and Sorcery has the main character being either a swordsman or a mage, and the action contains a lot of fighting and adventure. The action follows the main character and the use of his trusty sword in his battles.



Sub-Genres of Romance

Contemporary Romance are tales set mostly in the present time, but can also take place anytime after the World Wars. Romances often contain elements of suspense, humor, drama, or a mix of more than one.

Fantasy Romance is still centered on a romantic tale, but takes place on other worlds and contain elements of magic. They can also sometimes incorporate mystical creatures, like fairies or dragons, or horrific creatures, like vampires and werewolves.

Futuristic Romance is set in the far future and contains some elements of science fiction.

Glam Romance is often focused on the rich and powerful, jet-set type crowds, or celebrity-like characters. Books by Jackie Collins or Judith Krantz fit this sub-category.

Historical Romance are stories set in the past and generally before the World Wars. This can include the American West, American Colonial, American Civil War, American Revolution, American Reconstruction, Native American, Australian Colonial, European Dark Ages, Early European Renaissance, French Revolution, Celtic, Medieval England, Middle Ages England, Victorian England and Regency England periods.

Medieval Romance has stories about knights in shining armor rescuing damsels in distress in medieval European settings.

Paranormal Romance contains "other-worldly" elements such as ghosts or specters. Can also be extended to include spirits, devils, demons or angels. In some cases, the characters may possess certain paranormal 'powers'.

Regency Romance stories are set in England in the early 1800's, yet are not the same as a "Historical Romance". They generally have a stronger focus on the surrounding society and the interaction between characters.

Romantic Comedy is romance intermixed with humor in some form, whether it's fast-paced screwball antics or simple, quiet wit.

Romantic Suspense contains an element of mystery and intrigue. In this cross-genre, the Romance is the focus and the suspense is a side plot. Sub-categories include espionage, forensics, homicide, drug-dealing, or smugglers. These books contain a more dramatic tone and are most frequently set in a contemporary setting.

Time Travel Romance contain stories that are set across two different time periods with one or more characters "time-traveling" between both.



Sub-Genres of Horror

Gothic Horror is characterized by gloomy settings and sinister events and the main character being trapped in some way. There are two types of gothic story: English and American. **English gothic horror** has a dark past shadowing the present and often have haunted settings, such as castles, crypts, dungeons, and mansions. There are gloomy images of ruin, decay, imprisonment, and cruelty. **American gothic horror** takes a more psychological setting, focusing more on a psychological breakdown rather than a gloomy style of setting.

Psychological Horror plays most on the "fear of the unknown," using knowledge of a perceived or unknown danger, creating psychological torment. Many stories that fall into this category use a distortion of reality to produce a supernatural feel. At times, this can be from the viewpoint of a person with a distorted view of reality, such as in stories of maniacs and sociopaths like Hannibal Lecter from the movie, *Silence of the Lambs*.

Comic Horror What about when horror crosses into a genre that gives it the opposite effect of fear? Is it still horror if you're laughing? The satire added to horror is gaining popularity, such as *Zombie Slapstick* and *Sci-Fi/Weird Fantasy Spoof*. If the horror elements are there, but you're laughing too, it's probably Comic Horror.

Splatterpunk goes straight for the gross-out effect – think slasher films with graphic violence and murder like the movie *Halloween* and its many sequels. Instead of scaring you with the unknown, Splatterpunk tries to make your stomach turn with gory images and lots of blood and guts.

Supernatural Horror has ghosts, vampires, werewolves, zombies, witches, or monsters. Also included are supernatural events, such as demonic possessions or mind control. Many of Stephen King's novels fall into this sub-genre.

Surreal Horror blends reality with a mind that lives in a dream world, which makes it difficult in the story to tell where the dream world ends and reality begins.

Urban Horror has characteristics common to Splatterpunk, but typically takes place in an underworld of crime. Stories are about corruption, violence, and oppression in a world that's indifferent to the crime.



Sub-Genres of Science Fiction

Notice the difference between Science Fiction and Fantasy: The unrealistic happenings in science fiction are explained by **science**, while fantasy uses **magic and supernatural** as part of its natural world.

Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic stories focus on the end of the world, or the world just after "the end." Society is either wiped out or destroyed and must be rebuilt.

Cyberpunk is set in a high-tech, often bleak, mechanistic and futuristic universe of computers, hackers, and computer/human hybrids. Humans may have built-in computers or software and spend considerable time "living" in a virtual environment, as in *The Matrix*.

Dystopian Fiction uses a dystopia for a setting: a futuristic world in which everything has gone wrong and people are trying to survive from day-to-day. (Think of the opposite of a Utopia: a perfect world.)

First Contact explores when the first contact is made between humans and aliens, ranging from horrific tales of invasions to stories of benign visitors bearing the secrets of advanced technologies and world. The meeting may occur on Earth, in space, or on another planet.

Hard Science Fiction is scientifically-correct science fiction. Believable science and technology are central to the plot. Stories have a good grasp of the scientific principles included. A lot of classic science fiction, including the earlier works of Asimov and Heinlein, fall into this category.

Humorous Science Fiction may occur within any of these sub-genres or may spoof a sub-genre. Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is one of the best-known examples.

Military Science Fiction looks at combat in space or on another planet against a various enemies (modified humans, aliens, machines), with futuristic, high-tech weaponry (including genetically modified soldiers).

Sociological Science Fiction is character-driven, with emphasis on social change, personal psychology and interactions, etc. While technology may play a role, the emphasis is not so much on how that technology works, but how it affects individuals or social groups. Ursula K. LeGuin is a popular author of sociological science fiction.

Space Operas often involves good guys "shooting it up" with bad guys (who may be aliens, robots, or other humans) in the depths of space or on a distant planet. Wars amongst interstellar empires is common and *Star Wars* is a classic example. Lots of action and adventure in a space setting.

Steampunk is science fiction that takes place in the 19th century Victorian age. The word "steam" comes from the steam-powered technology used during that time of the Industrial Revolution, and "punk" is borrowed from the genre Cyberpunk – although the exact opposite in terms of time period and technology used. H.G. Wells and Jules Verne are often thought of as the grandfathers of Steampunk.

Time Travel was popularized by H.G. Wells with *The Time Machine* back in 1888. In this genre, characters travel to the past or future, or are visited by travelers from one or the other. Travelers go to other eras in time to see what life was like then or to change the course of history.



Sub-Genres of Adventure

Adventure Suspense has characters who get into the worst possible situations and usually have everything thrown at them. There is always a villain: a fanatical terrorist, a murderous psychopath, etc. Filled with action in every scene, the story is a roller coaster ride of chills and excitement and doesn't always have a happy ending.

Crime Fiction focuses on the crime, the criminal, and the victims of the crime as opposed to a mystery, which focuses on the character and actions of the person solving the crime. Storylines can take place around courtroom dramas, police procedurals, street and prison life, unsolved mysteries, or mafia crime.

Disaster Stories are similar to survival fiction, but the events are caused by some sort of natural disaster: tornado, hurricane, flood, raging fire, etc.

Intrigue and Espionage are typical spy stories that focus on the action and events. A lot of hide-and-seek as the good guys seek out the bad guys. Political conspiracies, crime kingpins, and international drug cartels are examples.

Expedition and Exploration stories contain lots of action, adventure, and suspense as the characters go off on an exploration into unknown lands. Locations are remote, such as mountains, the arctic, or deep in a rain forest.

Survival Fiction is the most common type of adventure, where the main character must fight to survive. Settings may include remote locations where no rescue can take place.

War Stories have settings that solely take place during a war. The adventure may focus on the main character fulfilling their mission or escaping the effects of war around them.



Sub-Genres of Historical Fiction

Traditional Historical Novels are, straightforward stories that describe a historical period, place, and its inhabitants as realistically as possible. They typically have strong plots in which the time and place plays an important role in the story rather than simply being in the background.

Alternate History rewrites history in a way that completely changes the world; for example, if the South won the Civil War. An author examines an alternative possible outcome for a past event and writes about how history may have changed as a result.

Historical Adventures have fast-paced action and heroic protagonists who travel far in their quest, to fight an enemy, or to face off against nature. Examples are exotic adventures in barbarous foreign lands and naval adventures.

Historical Mysteries are novels in which detectives from past eras solve crimes using techniques appropriate to the time period. Common past eras are 1830's New Orleans and Victorian England.

Historical Thrillers are suspenseful stories set in the past that feature intelligent protagonists who find themselves in perilous situations, with potential danger always around the corner. Think serial killers in 19th century New York City or spies in WWII-era Europe.

Multi-Period Epics contain chronological snapshots of either one historical period or of a particular cultural/ethnic group which shows how the place or its people have changed over time.

Romantic Historical Novels focus on the relationship between two people with a large part of the story focusing on the historical backdrop; for example, Medieval England or the early 20th century American West.

Sagas focus on characters' domestic lives and family relationships, especially over multiple generations. They may occur in multi-volume series. The novel *Roots* by Alex Haley is a good example.

Western Historical Novels Horror are set in the historical American West, from the mid-16th century through the mid-20th century, which incorporate many historical details and a strong sense of place. Women of the West, western sagas, cattle drives, Indian life, Texas Rangers, etc. are all common.