

All-American Love Stories

WHY READERS FLOCK TO TALES ABOUT MEN — AND WOMEN — IN UNIFORM

By Jennifer Peters

SOME OF THE most swoonworthy romantic heroes and awesomely enjoyable heroines are those who don a military uniform. Whether it's a kickass female soldier, a brazen Navy SEAL or even a troubled veteran, readers can't pass up a romance featuring a member of the armed forces.

"I think there's really something compelling about a hero or a heroine who is willing to sacrifice themselves for something bigger than themselves," explains author Jessica Scott. "That pull to belong is really powerful, and it speaks to readers of military romance in a way that other subgenres of romance may not."

Scott would know best. In addition to being a military romance writer and long-time reader, she's also an active-duty officer in the U.S. Army and a veteran of the Iraq war.

But even for Scott, writing stories about these heroes and heroines isn't always easy. "There's a fantasy element involved in romance that makes it difficult to delve into some of the grittier subjects," Scott explains. "I also refuse to deal with some topics and get really annoyed with the way some things are portrayed in military romance. I really wish people would stop taking one bad explosion or the death of a single friend and making it into an event that is magically healed by the heroine. I mean, I get it, romance is about fantasy and we all want to believe that finding the love of your life cures everything. It's just that it's so much more complicated than that."

Other military romance writers agree, saying that they began writing in the genre in part to tell stories that they felt were missing or weren't being told well. For M.L. Buchman, a bestselling author of romantic suspense, the problem was a lack of women at the center of these military stories. "I will automatically heave across the room a book with the 'frail female rescued by the noble warrior.' I find the stereotypical 'powerful hero' equally irritating," he says. "Our soldiers are people. They have specialized training, skills and far more dangerous challenges, but still, they are people."

Buchman filled that void with his own novels, many of which feature female soldiers who are as heroic, if not moreso, than their male counterparts. "Often, the women were hapless bystanders, left behind at home, or when they did get wound into the action, they were ultimately rescued by the hero," Buchman says. "Not a single woman was superior to or even on par with her male counterparts. That was the story I wanted to tell, the one from the heart of the warrior women."

"I'd actually like to see more stories with the heroine being the military member," agrees author Candis Terry. "I have such a high regard for our women in the military that I'd love to see them get their recognition, too. And there's nothing sexier than a man who can love a woman who kicks ass as good as he does."

Another reason these writers feel compelled to tell these stories is because they're stories that aren't being told at all — not just in romance, but in the greater media landscape. Explains author



PHOTO BY MICHELLE CARSTROM (PUBLIC DOMAIN), VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Julie Ann Walker, "It's important to me to write about these types of people because sometimes I think we forget just how much our country's service members sacrifice in order to ensure we all sleep soundly in our beds at night. If I can remind readers of that sacrifice while also entertaining them, then I feel I've done my job as a romantic suspense/military romance writer."

That desire to bridge the military-civilian divide is one that military writers of all stripes — from newswriters and memoirists to literary and genre fiction authors — have been contending with in recent years, as the end of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in even less news about the military hitting the mainstream. And while there's been a resurgence of veteran-penned literary fiction, it's been slow to take hold. And to Scott, that's a shame. "The fact that we have been at war for a decade and a half and the vast majority of Americans do not know a single person who is serving or how the military works is borderline criminal," she says. "We need to understand that soldiers are people just like everyone else: flawed and mortal. People believing that all soldiers are heroes is incredibly problematic and fosters an environment where no real dialogue can happen about how to transform the military — and society — for the next conflict."

Buchman agrees that the divide between the military and civilian populations needs to be closed. "There is a disconnect that one female helicopter crew chief explained to me this way as we sat at a small table in the corner of her mother's restaurant in Washington state: 'At a similar table in Iraq, I know that my teammates would have my back, ready to defend me from an attacker coming from behind. Sitting with you, I don't know if that is true. This is one change of a thousand every day.'"

“One of the reasons I write the stories I do is to try to show that difference,” Buchman continues. “If my stories become a platform for bridging that gap between even a few people, I will be thrilled.”

To help readers get the truest possible story and bridge that divide, writers of military romance delve deep into the world of their characters, doing in-depth research and making sure to get input from members of the community they’re trying to portray. According to Terry, “Any research I do is direct. I’m more of a boots-on-ground kind of researcher, so if I write about a specific area, I actually go there to gather information. If I’m writing about a Marine who has come back from the war, I interview a Marine who has come back from the war. I get real stories and real emotions.

“A perfect hero would be boring,” she adds. “I want to write about a hero with depth, integrity and challenges.”

The process is equally in-depth for Walker, whose romantic suspense novels require that she know not only the true voices of her characters, but that she fully understand what it’s like when they’re at war. “I go to the gun range to get a better understanding of weapons and how they operate under different circumstances. And I read a metric crap-ton of nonfiction military books on strategy, equipment and cutting-edge warfare tactics,” she says. “I feel

a responsibility to ‘get it right’ because I’m portraying fictionalized characters of real-life heroes and heroines. It’s both a burden and an unbelievable joy. And a challenge! Because while I want my characters to be heroic, to do the uniform or the office proud, I also want them to be real, to make mistakes, to have flaws.

“Simply put, I don’t want them to be cookie-cutter, two-dimensional cardboard cutouts of the quintessential ‘good guy,’” she continues. “I want them to be light and dark, have a little bad along with the good. Like we all do.”

And the work they’re doing is paying off. Not only is military romance attracting new readers every day, but the quality stories are impressing the men and women who’ve inspired them.

Says Walker, “One Marine in particular loves my books and sends me a fan letter after he reads each one. He likes the way I tell the stories from the male point of view as well as the female point of view. He says I really ‘get’ how guys think.”

“I’ve honestly been overwhelmed by the support from my male and female peers,” Scott adds. “It’s been really kind of awesome remembering that this is why we serve: because soldiers hold each other up instead of tearing each other down. It’s really amazing.” ✧

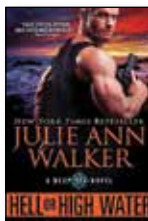
EIGHT TITLES TO TRY

FEELING INSPIRED TO give military romance a chance? We’ve picked eight recent releases that we think will have you feeling more patriotic than ever.

✦ **BRING ON THE DUSK** by M.L. Buchman (Sourcebooks, Mar.) Part of his Nightstalkers series, this female-driven romantic suspense novel is based on real-life Army helicopter pilots.



✦ **HELL OR HIGH WATER** by Julie Ann Walker (Sourcebooks, Jul.) Part treasure hunt, part military suspense, and full of romance between a fierce Navy SEAL and a determined CIA agent, this book has something for every reader.



✦ **HOMEFRONT** by Jessica Scott (Self-published, Apr.) Focusing on an officer recently returned from war and his fight to win back his family, this is a heartbreaking — and heartwarming — true-to-life story.



✦ **BEFORE I FALL** by Jessica Scott (Self-published, Mar.) Scott delves into the new adult world with an authentic story of a veteran getting back into civilian life and the struggles he faces as a new college student. The heroine is also the daughter of a vet, making their connection that much stronger.



✦ **WAY OF THE WARRIOR** (Sourcebooks, May) This anthology of eight stories featuring military heroes — including stories by Buchman and Walker — is not only a seriously good read, but a portion of the proceeds goes to the Wounded Warrior Project to help veterans.



✦ **HOVER** by Anne A. Wilson (Forge, Jun.) Written by a former U.S. Navy helicopter pilot, this story, while not strictly romance, focuses on the struggles of the female character as she tries to blend into the macho world of the Navy SEALs. Plus, the romantic plotline is great too!



✦ **RUNNING FIRE** by Lindsay McKenna (HQN, May) A romantic suspense novel that centers on a badass female pilot whose plane takes fire in Afghanistan, this is a great look at just how tough military women can be.



✦ **TRULY SWEET** by Candis Terry (Avon, Aug.) The final installment of her Sweet, Texas series, this is one of Terry’s most shining stories. Troubled Marine Jake Wilder is the perfect romance novel hero, and getting him to his HEA is a journey you won’t want to miss.