



Falling in (Book) Love

When I was twelve, I fell in love. No, not with a *person* . . . I was late to that particular party. Instead, I fell in love with a *book*. And an inappropriate book at that—a gaudy genre book, with romance and adventure and—gasp!—*science fiction!*

My mom, who'd been trying to get me to read Books For Nice Girls, was appalled. My dad was amused, since he was the science fiction fan in the household. He had never tried to get me to read anything, just left books out he thought I might find interesting. A much better strategy, as it turns out, than my mom's "You must read this because it is Good For You!" approach. (An even better approach: he began to *hide them* in drawers, so I had to look harder for them.)

The book in question was, in retrospect, not a great classic of literature. It wasn't even really a very *good* book. But none of that mattered, because at age 12, I didn't have much of a discerning eye for such things, and the only thing I cared about was that, suddenly, I *cared*. Passionately. So passionately I wept when I imagined the depth of the main character's pain. In

short, that book taught me how to project myself so fully into an imaginary situation that I felt very real emotion. And I was hooked.

I remember how book-mad I was about this story. I read it cover to cover at least a dozen times. I tried to find other books by the same author (and failed; she only wrote three in total and two were impossible to find). I wrote down all the character names and wrote little backstory information on them (some of it totally made up). I read the book out loud onto audiotape, dramatically. I dressed up my discarded Barbie dolls and acted out the Important Scenes. I wrote to the publisher and asked if I could please have a poster of the cover because I loooooooved the book so much.

Obsessed? Little bit, yeah. I even found myself making crossword puzzles out of the names when I was bored. *In church*.

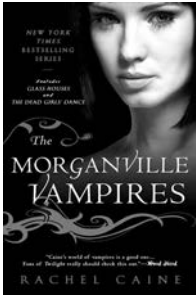
I look back on that as the moment where I realized that books were like friends I'd never met before. I credit that book, and the author, for opening up the world to me.

Fast forward many years. I was writing adult Science Fiction/Fan-

tasy (SF/F), and I loved it. I'd accidentally found myself in a brand new subgenre: urban fantasy. And I happened to be writing something offbeat from the usual tropes, so I stood out. Sales happened, to my shock. I mean, I love it when people buy my books, I just honestly never *expect* it.

And then my publisher cautiously broached the question of whether I might like to write for young adults. Now, mind you, when I was falling in love with books, there wasn't much for (a) teens and (b) girls in general . . . particularly not in SF/F, which I liked more than anything else. There were female characters, but they were generally the passive elements of the story, not the active ones. I'd learned to blow right past that, but still, on some level, it made me sad that there weren't too many female main characters being portrayed that appealed to teens in the paranormal/SF/F area.

I was *so* surprised to discover that there had been a complete sea change in teen literature during my absence—an amazing one. It wasn't just that there was more being written for the audience, it was *what* was being written. Strong



in.

About the time I was writing my first Morganville Vampires series, a book came out that got some buzz. It was *also* about vampires. You may have heard of it. Little thing called *Twilight*. So naturally, on the recommendation of a bookseller, I picked it up. It wasn't popular yet; it was selling well but hadn't become the tsunami of popularity it would become. So I was on the leading edge, I think.

And you know what? I liked it. I thought it was a pretty good story. In my mind, I saw Bella as the traditional kind of Gothic literature heroine. This was an unabashed romance story with a vampire twist, and yeah, she wasn't quite as assertive as others, but you know what? There's a spectrum of characters. Not every character needs to fall on the fringes. She was kind of . . . normal, thrown into an abnormal situation.

People often react with disbelief when I say I understand why teens, particularly early teens, fell so hard in love with the book, but I go back to the beginning of my story: you fall in love with a book. Not always the *most appropriate book*. And that doesn't really matter, because one book is not the defining element of your life. As you go on, read more, refine your viewpoints and your tastes, you may not like *Twilight* as well. You may love it.

stories. Great characters. Action, adventure, science fiction and fantasy and paranormal, oh my!

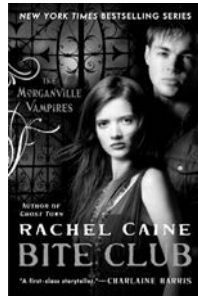
I was pretty excited to jump

You may look back on it with sentimental fondness. Or you may be appalled you ever read it.

And all of those are *okay*.

It's popular to hate *Twilight* now and, by extension, perhaps all teen-oriented vampire stories (a *big* mistake, and I am not talking just about my own works; there are some amazing books out there, believe me). In fact, some extend this disdain to *all YA literature*.

Which is just utterly absurd. The work being done on the YA shelves is, of course, a spectrum—some you'll love, some you'll hate, some you'll golf clap and forget. But right now, it's where genuinely fresh stories are shining through. Does it push the envelope? Yes. All genres have edges, and all edges get pushed. If they don't, the genre



becomes stale and people feel they're reading "the same old thing," until someone comes in and blows up the walls and suddenly there's a gold rush to explore the new territory. Witness the recent revival of the traditional epic fantasy series, which is surging ahead with glee (and shattering many of the traditional tropes).

So it's not too surprising that YA authors are also seeking new territory to claim for themselves. Sometimes, when you write an edgy epic fantasy, like George R. R. Martin and his *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, you get acclaim and awards. Sometimes, though, when you push the envelope in teen literature, you get outrage instead. Witness the recent spate of articles

in the mainstream press, such as Meghan Cox Gurdon's June 2011 *Wall Street Journal* article with the provocative tag line, "Contemporary fiction for teens is rife with explicit abuse, violence, and depravity. Why is this considered a good idea?"

The distressing thing is that it *isn't true*. Yes, there are books that show abuse, particularly child abuse and sexual abuse, because those are issues that teens face in their lives. And violence was certainly *everywhere* in my neighborhood and at my high school when I was growing up. Drug use was something she didn't mention, but it certainly was prevalent even when I was a teen. Ditto drinking. Ditto cursing. And you know what? Nancy Drew didn't exactly prepare me for the moment when someone I trusted went too far (in whatever way) on a date.

So I will defend to my last breath books that deal with the kinds of things teens *may* encounter. It's even better, of course, if they *never* encounter them, but there's something to be said for advance knowledge. We have afterschool specials about "The more you know," don't we? Why is it okay for grade school, but not for high school?

But the question that's being asked now, of course, is *how much is too much*?

And I think from an author's standpoint, it's very difficult to tell that, because all cultures are always in motion. What was daring 50 years ago may be quaint today. The pendulum swings both ways, too, because some things that wouldn't have raised an eyebrow in literature of the 1950s and '60s

wouldn't dare be published today in their original form, because of changing expectations and cultural acceptance. Hence, the outcry to re-



move acknowledged classics from libraries because they're no longer acceptable. So all we can do in this business is trust ourselves, and tell the stories we want to tell. I think most YA writers are aware that we're going to have to sit behind a table or stand in front of an audience and in some way justify our decisions. We're going to have to look into the eyes of an eleven-year-old who is heart-broken that we killed a beloved character, or a mom who is upset because our books used inappropriate language. We understand that there's something incumbent on us that may not be there in other markets. Those boundaries are hard to define, but they obviously exist when you read the criticism being leveled.

How will we adapt to that? I don't know. Certainly the YA literature being developed for the movies will be a test of the genre; with films like *The Hunger Games* showing both the creativity and challenge that authors are bringing to the shelves, there may be a wave of enthusiasm, or a firestorm of protest. Whatever comes of it, we will press on. It's what we do. It's *book love*, only this time from the other side of the page.

And I do love it, truly.

What keeps me going is the delight of doing the work, and the enthusiasm of my readers . . . and

that is *amazing*. I still write urban fantasy, and I adore it; my readers are fantastic people, and very supportive, but adult readers are typically more restrained in their approval. Remember how I talked about my obsession with that first book I loved? That's my YA audience. They write me long, long, *long* letters and emails. They draw pictures. They make videos. They show up in droves at events and signings, and scream and jump and hug and take photos with me. They make every minute of those early mornings and late nights getting the work done mean something special.

It humbles me to realize, as I do daily, that somewhere, someone is reading one of my novels—probably one of the YA novels—and it is blowing their head wide open and introducing them to the power of words. Then I recall that my first book-love wasn't very good, and maybe mine aren't much better; I leave that to other people to judge, frankly, because that way lies author madness. It still pleases me to think that I stand in that special and amazing place in some person's life out there . . . their *first book love*, whatever they may think of it later in life. Doesn't get better than that.

What amazes me is how many emails and letters I get telling me that my books did something for the readers—helped them deal with bullies, or make better grades, or cope with their bad situations. Then there are all of the letters I get saying that not only have I inspired them to read, but to write . . . and I get a *lot* of those. There is a whole generation of teens fired up by the great flowering of teen lit, and those teens are our next wave of

great authors. I think that's truly, tremendously exciting. Watch out, world. Ten years from now, you are going to be blown away, again.

I often get asked by teens who write to me what kind of advice I have for new writers, and I'll go ahead and share it here as well, because I think it's timeless advice (handed down to me from the very smart people who came before me):

- 1. Be a writer.** You can talk about writing all you want, but there is no substitute for sitting down and doing the work. Forget the excuses. Forget "finding the time," because there aren't spare moments lying around for you to gather up. You *make the time*, and you write. Or you don't. There are a thousand distractions, every day . . . and if there aren't, you can invent them. So writing is a choice you make, just like the gym, or spending time with your family.
- 2. Be committed.** Seriously, unless you are only with creative people, your family and friends *will not understand* why you can't just put off your writing. They'll interrupt you. They'll think you're not "really working." And from their perspective, they'll be right, so you have to get used to the fact that you're going to make hard choices if you want to really be a writer. You can't do everything, and that's going to make you feel bad sometimes. You have to accept it.
- 3. Be persistent.** Writing is an *art* and a *craft*. It is not something you just do out of nowhere, anymore than you are a natural-born ballet dancer or electrical engineer. Maybe you're a gifted

child, but lots of studies have shown that child prodigies rarely end up becoming stars . . . unless they also learn discipline and persistence. The first thing you write is just that—the first thing. To be a working writer, you must *keep writing*. And it will almost certainly take ridiculous amounts of time to succeed. I know a handful of writers who wrote their first book, sold it, and made a ton of money; they are the exceptions. Most work hard, work long, and eventually find success (or sometimes don't). If you're easily discouraged, you won't be doing this long. It's a marathon. No, it's a triathlon. And honestly? You never stop running it.

4. **Be wary.** This is a business that will break your heart and grind the pieces into dust if you let it. There are plenty of people who will take advantage of your wide-eyed innocence and enthusiasm; plenty more who may not rip you off, but will shrug and let you walk into a bad deal because it's your job to know the hazards. So educate yourself about the business of writing. Learn about publishing, about contracts, about agents, about every part of the process. And then talk to others. Then Google. Then start over, because you can never be prepared enough.
5. **Be self-critical.** This is very, very important. It's good to be confident; we're *all* confident, and have to be. But you must also look around you and measure yourself with clear eyes against everyone else. You must understand where your strengths and weaknesses are, and learn

how to maximize the first and minimize the second. You must learn to accept the hard knocks, the revisions, the critique, the 1-star reviews with grace, in a spirit of willingness to learn. Accept that you can always, always improve. If you don't do these things, your career will be tough and unpleasant, and quite probably short.

6. **Be grateful.** If you're a working writer, at any level, it's a gift. It may be the cheap on-sale Walmart closeout gift—mine certainly was for many years. There's really not much any author can do to hit the bestseller lists, except write the best thing possible at the time. Chance favors the persistent, and if Lady Luck winks at you, enjoy it and be grateful to those who helped you get there, and be generous to those who are still working at it. None of us control the process. It's much better to be happy where you are now than think you'll be happier if you could just be *over there*.

Yes, I still have mad book love. I read constantly. And I love going to work. As for my process specifically, I have office hours. I write during daily, standard hours (mine happen to be early mornings). I have work space, headphones, a playlist for each and every book, a coffeemaker, Internet access, and that's pretty much all I need. I can take everything I need with me in a single computer bag (well, except for the coffeemaker, but sacrifices must be made). I use Scrivener as my main word processor for my first and second drafts, then Word for copyedits, then my proofs gen-



erally arrive in Adobe Acrobat. I like Macs, and my little workhorse of a Macbook Air is a jewel.

I spend an average of 8 hours a day writing, then another 4 hours doing other things, like updating websites, blogging, answering email, designing promotional items. In all, it averages about 12 hours a day, with very few days off, but because I arrange my hours to have afternoons and evenings free, it's a little like having a weekend every day.

I think my life is pretty balanced. I travel a great deal and make lots of appearances just now; I spend about three to four months out of the year traveling, speaking at conventions, doing signings, giving lectures. When I can, I travel with my husband, who's an artist; because he doesn't fly, he forces me to slow my roll a little bit, take the train, drive, not be so frenzied to *get there*. We enjoy the journey, which is nice.

It's kind of an ideal life, for the moment. It won't stay this way; nothing does. In the next few years, my popularity will either grow or decline; either one will dictate what I do next. But I won't stop writing until someone makes me.

Because I have, now and always, crazy mad book love. And I hope you do, too.

Rachel Caine is the author of more than 20 novels. She is the author of several series, including the Weather Warden series, the Outcast series, the Morganville Vampires series, and the Revivalist series (August 2011).

She was born at White Sands Missile Range, which people who know her say explains a lot. She has been an accountant, a professional musician, and an insurance investigator, and until recently carried on a full-time secret identity in the corporate world. She and her husband, fantasy artist R. Cat Conrad, live in Texas with their iguanas, Popeye and Darwin, a mali uromastix named O'Malley, and a leopard tortoise named Shelley. Learn more about the author at www.rachelcaine.com; www.facebook.com/rachelcainefanpage; and www.twitter.com/rachelcaine.

Call for Student Reviews for *Voices from the Middle*

Voices from the Middle is NCTE's journal for the Middle Level Section. The Student to Student feature runs in each of the year's four issues and contains five short book reviews *written by students* who have enjoyed a book and want to recommend it to others. This has been a popular and motivating element of *VM* since its inception.

Wendy Ranck-Buhr, principal at the San Diego Cooperative Charter School, serves as department editor for this feature. She invites teachers from across the nation and the world to submit their students' book reviews. We know from teacher feedback that these reviews motivate students to write with care, help readers pick out new books, and generally support our students as readers and writers.

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