

There's a challenge going around on Facebook that asks you to name the top ten books that influenced you over the years. That was tough for me because I'm a voracious reader. I can't tell you how many books I've read in my lifetime. When I was a kid, my mother took my brother and me to the library every week. We would load up on the maximum allowed which was about six or eight books each, then head home to feast on the stories. By the time I was in junior high I'd devoured all the Nancy Drews and was sneaking into the back room where some of the racier fare was kept. My mother didn't seem to notice that Edison Marshall had made it into my pile.

My brother is four years younger so I had to hide my books from him because he'd tattle, no doubt about it. If he'd seen the steamy stuff in *The Viking* or *The American Captain*, he would have blown the whistle and my education would have been cut short. I also found *Angelique* by Sergeanne Golon. Not sure that's spelled right, but it was pretty hot stuff. Compared to the Frank Yerby historicals I loved, these books showed that romance could go pretty far beyond those chaste kisses I'd read before. Of course what I thought was erotic then was mild compared to what we see today.

All that reading as a teenager had a real impact on me. I knew I liked stories with a core romance. I wanted action and adventure too. By the time *Sweet Savage Love* came along, I was ready for it. You can call them bodice rippers if you want to, but I was glad the covers made them easy to find. I will never forget the scene when one of the heroines actually managed to force the hero to take her. Sigh. I loved that. Strong women, another must have.

Then I discovered Regency romances. I devoured Georgette Heyer's stories. The society and the language of that time spoke to me. Have I lived in that time period in a previous life? Maybe. Certainly, I couldn't get enough of them. But after overdosing on the traditional Regencies for several years, I finally decided I needed more. That's when I wrote my own Regency, the book that became my Golden Heart finalist and eventually was published in 2002, *Sweet Deceit*. I wanted to see into the Regency bedroom and delve into the characters.

I don't doubt that all those years of reading historicals, Heyer and even the little Harlequins I loved influenced how I put that book together. I had absorbed "story." I knew the rhythm required to keep a book moving. Yes, sometimes I slow down too much because I love the sound of my own words. That's why I have a critique group. But the innate feeling I have when I'm writing that something's off, that I need to add a scene or delete it, I think comes from all that reading.

And of course I still read. You can take a look at all the reviews I've posted on Goodreads to see that. And, trust me, I've read more than just those books. I have a policy. If I read a book that I can't give three, four or five stars, I don't review it. It's a do unto others philosophy. Some books I just can't finish. I hate them that much or they bore me to tears and I can't get past page fifty. Well, then I don't review them. And I'm not about to trash a fellow author. We all make mistakes and I've made them too. I hope they are under my bed and not out there published. But we all have our own opinions.

Now to my point. Some writers are afraid to read in their genre. Afraid it will influence the story they are writing. I say, b.s. You have your own voice. What you write is yours. I could give you a plot, take the same plot, and we could both write a book using it. My story would end up totally different from yours, I guarantee it. Because I will put my unique spin on it. I bring my own experiences to the table and you bring yours. Yes, part of it is education. But that includes the education I get every time I read a great book. I don't read just for the pure joy anymore or at least not often. I lost that objectivity years ago. I read as a writer. When an author makes me go "Wow!," I analyze what happened. How did she do that? What is her secret? How can I make that work for me? And I learn. Every time. Even from bad books and, boy, are they out there.

So I hope you're still reading while you write. When my butt gets tired from sitting at the computer I stretch out on the couch or the bed with a book and start working a different way. I've got a huge start on my to-be-read pile and the AmEx bill to prove it. That's okay. I take it

off my income tax.

Gerry Bartlett is the nationally best-selling author of the Real Vampires series. She admits she was influenced by Anne Rice's vampires then Maggie Shayne's romantic vamp books when she started writing her series in 2005. Look for **REAL VAMPIRES TAKE A BITE OUT OF CHRISTMAS** on-line now.