

BOOKS

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Why do fans love dark romance so much?

BY CLARE MULROY
USA TODAY Network via Reuters Connect

Dying for stories with high stakes and deep passion? Enter dark romance, where vigilantes, Mafia bosses and stalkers go hand in hand with happily-ever-afters. Romance is among the few genres growing in sales, and readers are increasingly shifting from rom-coms toward romances with darker themes, according to Circana BookScan.

Despite memes pointing out these love interests are people fans “would pepper spray in real life,” many readers say dark romance is misunderstood. So what is it about morally gray men that has them swooning?

WHAT IS DARK ROMANCE?

Like the broader romance genre, dark romance guarantees a happily-ever-after. But it’s a messier journey.

“There’s a heavier kind of backstory that tends to happen for a lot of the characters,” says Brynne Weaver, author of “Butcher & Blackbird,” a dark rom-com and USA TODAY best-seller. “There’s a bit of murder and mayhem and chaos. It might be a toxic relationship ... there might be a childhood story of trauma. It’s just got these heavier, adult content themes for the characters to explore.”

Dark romance deals in taboo, whether that be power dynamics between lovers or danger lurking beyond a relationship. Serial killers and stalkers find love, sometimes with their targets. Popular tropes include forced proximity, alpha males and enemies-to-lovers (“It really increases the tension and stakes,” Weaver says). Dark romances often blend genres and may include hints of dark academia, fairy-tale or fantasy. Mafia romances are especially popular, delving into the gritty underworld of organized crime. Arranged marriages can be a winning trope.

WHY READERS ARE OBSESSED

Lia Lan, 25, is a longtime romance reader, and adding books with a thrilling element keeps her “engaged” and “giggling and kicking (her) feet.” It’s all about taking love to extremes.

“It’s really so romantic, all of the things that these men are willing to do for the women they’re in love with,” Lan says.

Forget flowers – the men of dark romances maim as a grand gesture. In “The Finisher” by RuNyx, a favorite of Lan’s, the male lead character proclaims: “I cut the hand of a man who touched your hair, Zephyr. What do you think I will do to the one you move on with?”

But let’s go back to the “someone you would pepper-spray in real life” point. This is where the dark romance genre catches the most flak. Isn’t romance supposed to be something you dream about? Who dreams about a stalker?

It’s a crucial misunderstanding of the genre, Weaver says.

“Nobody is saying that they want to experience any of this in real life. It’s very much like horror and thriller,” Weaver says. “I don’t want to go and get chased down by a clown, but do I want to watch a movie about it or read a book about it? Sure.”

These morally gray characters blur the lines between good and evil. They’re rebellious and unexpected. But they come from a place of love. In Mafia romances, actions are often derived from rules about honor and survival.

“Things are very stressful on many fronts – personal, political, financial,” says Stacy Boyd, executive editor at Harlequin. “Reading about men who can take care of people – I’m just going to take care of that. It’s going to not be a problem anymore because I’m going to go get rid of that person” – there’s an appeal to that.”

Dark romance novels often include a list of trigger warnings at the start of the book. This is because dark romance also dabbles in some topics that are disturbing for some readers.



Roland Orzabal records in Neptune's Kitchen, his home studio in England.

Tears for Fears singer shares the darkest chapter of his life

BY MELISSA RUGGIERI
USA TODAY

Roland Orzabal never wanted to write a memoir.

A book about astrology, yes. But digging into the fluctuating tenure of Tears for Fears, the sorrow in watching his wife slip away and revisiting his Ambien addiction? Not really at the top of his to-do list.

So Orzabal, 64, placated his agent, wrote a few introductory chapters and realized he could integrate his deep knowledge of astrology into the story of his life as the co-founder, guitarist and co-singer-songwriter in one of the most quietly consequential bands birthed in the ‘80s.

The resulting “Welcome to Your Life: Love, Death and Tears for Fears” (HarperCollins, 288 pp.) bears the tagline “An Astrological Memoir” as testament to Orzabal’s understanding of the world.

“I can’t look at life, or the chemistry between people, or the energies we are made from, or the qualities we’re made from without using the astrological model,” Orzabal, bespectacled with grayed hair neatly pulled back, says on a video call from New England. “I could have written a ‘memoir,’ but it would have been absolutely lacking in depth. Even in suffering, there is understanding. I mean, I wouldn’t know how not to (live this way). So yeah, I wanted to write a book on astrology because most of the books I read, they’re all kind of menu books, like right, yeah, come on.”

HOW ORZABAL INTEGRATES ASTROLOGY

In 2014, Orzabal’s debut novel, “Sex, Drugs & Opera,” arrived. Its storyline about a middle-aged pop star who tries to rejuvenate his career and marriage by taking part in a reality show stemmed from real life, though Orzabal turned down the TV offer extended to him in 2010.

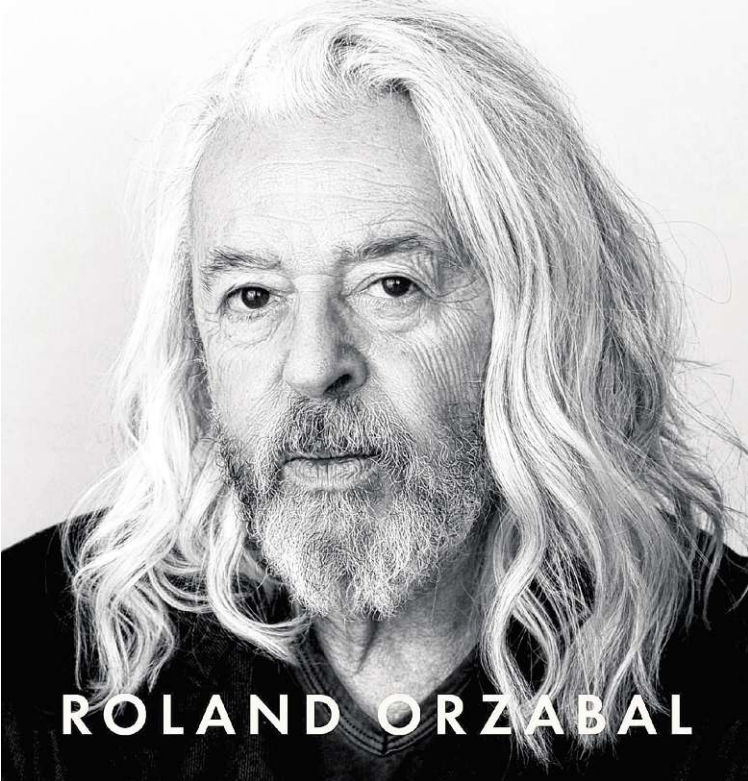
But “Welcome to Your Life” – which music fans will instantly recognize as the first line of TFF’s breakthrough hit, “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” – is devoid of rom-com inanity.

Instead, it is packed with vivid anecdotes about the “fearless, confident” Curt Smith, his childhood friend in Bath, England, whose musical meshing with Orzabal “felt like the missing piece of a jigsaw,” he writes. The pair formed Tears for Fears as teens after stints in other local bands, and eventually sold more than 30 million albums worldwide on the strength of songs both sumptuous and cerebral, such as

AN ASTROLOGICAL MEMOIR

WELCOME TO YOUR LIFE

LOVE, DEATH *and* TEARS FOR FEARS



Tears for Fears singer Roland Orzabal delves into addiction, loss and astrology in his memoir, “Welcome to Your Life.”

“Shout” and “Mad World.”

Orzabal’s wry humor surfaces throughout (a running joke about The Beatles and path-crossings with Paul McCartney is particularly amusing) and most stories are spiked with astrological explanations.

An early chapter delves into how the movements of Pluto are connected, along with its representation of fate and impact as the astrological planet of birth, death and rebirth.

These elucidations are not only fascinating, but wholly original as far as rock star memoirs go.

DEEPER BOND THROUGH GRIEF

Before he got to his current place of being happily remarried with a 13-month old daughter joining his adult sons Raoul and Pascal, Orzabal endured plenty of personal anguish.

“Some of (the book), when I was writing it, I was in tears,” he says. “A lot of the time we kind of push things toward the back. But when you’re writing it, you’re confronted with some of the ugliness. Grief is a well and I think in your life you can replace the ugliness with beau-

ty. But that ugliness is not ever really going to go away.”

While TFF fans were aware of the slow decline of Orzabal’s wife, Caroline Johnston, who died in 2017 at the age of 54 of alcohol-related cirrhosis and dementia, the book illuminates not only her struggles, but the eroding emotional toll on Orzabal.

Her loss, however, spurred a deeper bond between Orzabal and Smith, as the pair had periods of drifting apart throughout the decades.

“There was a healing of that relationship between me and Curt after Caroline’s death, no doubt. I think my new wife, Emily, has really helped that because she’s a nice person. I would say Caroline was happy to be antagonistic,” Orzabal says with a fond smile. “But Curt became that rock, a solid partner. And I’ve told him to his face and in emails that he’s been excellent.”

Even with the intricate details of Caroline’s deterioration, Orzabal admits he cushioned some of the revelations.

“Let’s put it this way – I could have made it worse. I could have written more ugliness, but

“GRIEF IS A WELL AND I THINK IN YOUR LIFE YOU CAN REPLACE THE UGLINESS WITH BEAUTY. BUT THAT UGLINESS IS NOT EVER REALLY GOING TO GO AWAY.”

Roland Orzabal, on writing his memoir

she’s my sons’ mother, so I had to be gentle with my language,” he says. “I don’t throw her under the bus because she’s no longer here, but because most of her life she was incredible.”

DISCLOSING HIS ADDICTION

When it comes to his self-reflections, however, Orzabal is unsparing. His penchant for downing bottles of wine throughout his life seemed reasonable. But an increasing dependence on Ambien, and steady increases in dosages, led him to the brink of death in 2018.

Blackouts and seizures, tremors that became full-body shakes, stabbing chest pains. Orzabal credits the quick reactions of Emily, his girlfriend at the time, for getting him to the hospital and saving his life.

Though the outlining of his hellish spiral arrives late in the book, Orzabal says it was the fourth chapter he wrote as a test to see if he could produce a memoir.

The “ugly story” as he calls it in our interview, is the first time he disclosed the severity of his addiction.

“Most people don’t know it. Even my family don’t know,” he says. “I mean, they know something. They know I had seizures. But it was scary stuff.”

MUSIC STILL RESONATES

Orzabal says he’s recently recorded nine new music tracks, but there are no plans for a Tears for Fears album any time soon. “Curt is taking a break from making music,” Orzabal said without elaborating.

Though he has a couple songs “on the go,” he’s taking a wait-and-see approach right now.

He’s pleased, though, that on recent TFF tours, the audience has been equally comprised of holdovers from the band’s ‘80s and ‘90s hitmaking pinnacle and younger fans.

“There was a period of darkness in the ‘80s and what I think younger people are finding through streaming is access to some songs that have a little bit more meaning,” Orzabal says. “They’re a bit darker and they can truly express what is going on inside them. Whereas the multi-billion-selling pop machine, it doesn’t want to provide it.”