

## **Conflict and Connection**

by Jenna Kernan

Conflict and Connection are two equally important components of any romance. A story needs characters in conflict in order to make the reader wonder if your protagonists will be able to resolve their differences, while building connections gives the reader hope that, no matter how great their problems, these two MUST be together. The push and pull between these forces provides the delicious tension that holds readers and keeps them flipping pages to see just how this will all work out. The balance between these yin and yang components must be exactly right. If the connection overpowers the conflict, the reader might wonder what is keeping the protagonists apart. If the conflict overwhelms the connection, the reader might decide that no matter what the characters say in the final chapter, their differences are simply too great for them to achieve a lasting relationship. The two components are interwoven, but I'm still trying to tease them out into two separate articles. This first part will deal with the push of conflict that drives protagonists apart while [Part 2: Connection: Made for Each Other](#), will explore the forces that pull two people together, making them more than compatible, but perfect for each other. So perfect, in fact, that they are willing to do anything in order to win the love of their opposite, including becoming who they were meant to be; happy, fulfilled and committed, in other words—worthy of love.

So let's get started by exploring the forces of division and the creation of believable roadblocks that convince both protagonists that the other person is the absolute worst possible choice for them to love.

### **Part 1: Conflict: Anyone But Him**

We've all read stories (and probably written stories) where a potential love scene is interrupted by a ringing phone, a knock at the door or some other outward, coincidental blockade. This does occasionally happen, but it is not the way to separate people for long. The reader might tend to roll their eyes and think, "Yeah right" or worse, "Cheating." Bickering is equally ineffective because, while it does keep the protagonists apart, it also tends to convince the reader that the relationship is doomed to fail because they just can't get along.

So what's a writer to do?

It helps to build outer barriers which are tied to the protagonist's belief of who they are. This can make your people act in ways that help them continue to be who they have become, while impeding them from getting what they really want or really need. These beliefs are the result of a painful experience or wound that occurred in the past, but that has left a mark on what they have become. This wound has changed their belief system. Their wound and their fears now have them operating in ways that often run counter to what is really best for them.

You need to show the hero and heroine making true connections (which I'll write more about in part 2) but the writer must also keep the protagonists from falling in love too soon and spoiling the tension in the story. They need to come to this conclusion only at the bitter end. Until then, they need to fight, fight, fight what draws them together with all the valid reasons that being together is either impossible or a very, very bad idea.

Romance writers need to have protagonists connect and clash. They have to show character growth, for not just one protagonist, but two. So let's consider the clash. How do you make it strong enough to sustain tension and true enough to have the protagonists believe that this person is the worst choice in the entire world for them? Your heroine needs to believe absolutely, 'anyone but him.' She needs to be baffled as to why she is drawn to this guy who is so obviously all wrong for her. Why she can't do the sensible thing and keep her distance when this relationship has disaster written all over it? Then you need to do the same thing for him.

Oh, you want to know HOW to do that? Me, too. Here is what I've figured out so far.

First, the protagonists need to have goals that are in opposition. And second they need to be pursuing these goals for admirable reasons. For example he could be a duck hunter and she's runs a bird rehabilitation center, but I'm going to have a hard time rooting for a guy who blows little ducks heads off with a shotgun. The opposition is there, but she has the admirable goal and he sure doesn't. Now, if he were killing ducks in an effort to feed the homeless, it might be better (but I still am rooting for the ducks). So here are a few that might be better: He wants to renovate the house to make a youth center; she needs to tear it down to put in a community bike trail. She wants to save the family ranch; he wants to buy the note to expand his own land. He's an environmentalist protecting the wetlands; she's a geologist exploring for possible natural gas deposits to bring jobs to an economically strapped community. He's a innocent fugitive; she's F.B.I. assigned to bring him in or lose her job.

Third, the protagonists' goals have to be essential--truly, deeply and vitally important. If it is not critical, then the hero and heroine will not dig in their heels and stay in a bad situation when the fight begins in earnest. No sane person will stand and fight over some trivial matter. Instead they will, shrug and think, 'life is too short to bother with this' and then walk away. The author needs to build a goal that is way too vital for the protagonists to even consider giving up. Over time this vital goal becomes less important than gaining a new desire (the love of the other protagonist). But it will be a long struggle to come to this realization. The conclusion might be getting something unexpected that suits them better or sacrificing their original goal in order to ensure they gain something more important—the love of the other protagonist.

So let's look at a few examples of the conflicts that tear interpersonal relationships to shreds.

### **Finding Nemo**

Marlin, the dour clownfish dad is a complete kill joy. He is outwardly overprotective, obsessive-compulsive and full of fears that something will happen to his only son Nemo. He is in opposition with his son who needs autonomy. His dad is crushing him to death

with his overbearing, dictatorial, domineering. Nemo needs some control; Marlin needs to protect. They are in opposition from the start and both have an admirable goal and the goal is way too important to just throw up one's flippers and give up. So, Marlin clashes with his son about going to school, then on arrival, embarrasses Nemo by recommending his son play on the sponge beds with the baby fish. Marlin argues with the other parents at school, argues with the teacher fish, the sharks, the whale, the school of silver fish, the turtles, the pelican and poor Dori. He opposes any efforts to do other than what he feels is best for his son. It is obvious to everyone but Marlin that he is being a jerk and that his efforts to protect Nemo are actually the impetus that placed his son in danger in the first place.

It is his fears, caused by death of his wife and offspring, that have changed Marlin into what he has become and these fears have changed his belief system. Now, his truth is that he knows best and he needs to keep Nemo safe, even if it kills them both.

Neither Nemo nor Marlin can swim (walk) away. Nemo is growing toward adulthood and he will fight to earn his independence, even if it kills him. Marlin will not let anything, including his own son, endanger his boy. Locked in opposition with no way out, they are destined to clash.

Toward the end of the story, Marlin, after finding Nemo, allows his son to endanger himself in a trolling net, because his son believes he can save all the fish. He has learned something on his journeys because, at the beginning of the story, Marlin would have overruled Nemo and ordered him away. In fact, he tried to do just that before Nemo was captured. Now he gives up the goal, of being sure that nothing happens to his son, in order to support his son's efforts, dangerous though they are.

### **Lethal Weapon**

Marty Riggs has a goal that puts him in opposition with his new partner. Marty is a suicidal detective and his partner, Detective Murtaugh is about to retire. So you have a man who wants to be dead, partnered with a man with everything to live for. This is great opposition. Neither one can walk away because they have both been ordered by their superior to make this situation work and they both have the admirable objective of wanting to solve a crime (involving a suicide which nicely, echoes Riggs' dilemma) and they neither man wants to walk away because they both really want to solve this crime.

Riggs is experiencing the paralyzing grief caused by the recent death of his beloved wife of eleven years, killed in an auto accident. Riggs believes that the only way to end his crushing pain is to die. This leads him to recklessness while doing his job (jumping off buildings to control the suicidal man and facing a sniper alone). His risky behavior is correctly perceived by Detective Murtaugh as a threat to his own health, safety, retirement and life.

Lt. Murtaugh and his boisterous, loving family, will help Riggs reconsider what he wants. Ironically, it is when he decides he wants to live, that he almost dies protecting Murtaugh's family from the villain who is just like Riggs in every way except he is already dead inside. The screenwriters have created two characters with important,

admirable goals that are in opposition and a situation that makes it impossible for either man to walk away.

### **Pirates of the Caribbean, Search for the Black Pearl**

Elizabeth Swan, the proper daughter of the governor of Port Royal, is caught in a love triangle between the man she knows is a 'smart match' and the secret longing she has for the son of a pirate, whose identity she protected when they were both children. She wants Will Turner to overcome his deference to her social superiority and pursue her as a woman, but he knows his place and is unfailingly polite and respectful, which irritates her to no end.

They are stuck on an island, so they are trapped by geography and by their mutual desire for one another, which they are unable to control regardless of the inappropriateness of such a liaison and the complications it will cause. But just why does that mutual desire work as the glue that keeps Will and Elizabeth from walking away from each other and doing what they both know is expected?

We will look at this in our next article, as we explore the connection that explains why, despite their differences, your protagonists might be perfect together.

## Conflict and Connection

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I actually wrote this article first and only afterwards realized that this was really a two part deal. This article focuses on how to build connections between protagonists, while the conflict (discussed in Part I: Conflict, Anyone But Him) keeps the hero and heroine at odds until the last possible second. The seesaw between connection and conflict, throughout the story, will cause your protagonists to be deeply conflicted thinking one thing and feeling quite another and maintain the tension that keeps readers flipping pages.

### Part 2: Connection: Made for Each Other

Ever wonder what makes two characters appear to be perfect for each other? As you read, you can see these two have what it takes to fulfill each other, even if they can't see it themselves. How did the author do that?

I wonder and I'm not sure I have it all worked out. But I have already worked out what you don't want to do. You don't want a book in which the characters love each other only because they are extremely good looking and because they are in the same book together. And you don't want two characters that do not have enough about them to like or love to make the reader even care what happens to them. And you don't want characters who bicker instead of tackling real conflict.

Whenever I sit down with my germ of an idea, I want to build two fabulous characters that are perfect for each other because each sees in the other their true selves, even if it is hidden or when they, themselves, don't know it exists. It is like Renee Zelweger's character, Dorothy Boyd, says to her sister in the movie *Jerry McGuire*, "I love him! I love him for the man he wants to be. And I love him for the man he almost is." Dorothy sees the potential missed by the rest of the world. That is why she is THE ONE for him. They alone can peek behind the mask and see the inner beauty beneath.

To achieve this, the author will give each character an outward persona and a secret, guarded inner self. It is on this inner level that the protagonists connect because only their perfect opposite can see past who they appear to be and glimpse who they really are, or who they *could* be. To the rest of the world, they appear to be one thing—an outer personality designed to protect themselves from the vulnerability of letting others see their true self. This outer self is constructed on a belief system that grew out of their horrible past experience. It is the ability of their opposite to see the true self that makes them 'the one' and not her violet eyes or his six foot-three inch chiseled frame.

In addition, something about their perfect opposite makes them drop their persona and communicate at the inner level of true self for some brief periods of time after which they do a little freak-out, because it is so scary to let someone really see them and in

this freak-out, reengage their force fields and return to their guarded self. This upsets their opposite who finds the guarded self to be a jerk and the clash begins again. This undulation between secret self and guarded self makes the characters vacillate between moments of true connection followed by moments when they collide. The outer persona is just armor, a protective shell that gives the appearance of strength and independence.

This necessitates that the author create an excellent backstory for each character that includes a really valid, understandable reason why your hero needs to hide who he or she really is. This is often called the wound. For example, if the heroine has a disfigurement, as my heroine Lucie West does in *His Dakota Captive*, she might have decided that she can be thought of only as useful, but never beautiful. He might feel that his part in the accidental death of his brother is such an unforgivable act that he does not deserve happiness. She's not going around saying, "I'm ugly," but if you were to tell her she was beautiful, she would believe you were mocking her or just think you were crazy, because it challenges her belief of who she is. This belief grows out of the wound (disfigurement in this case). And he won't say to the heroine, "No, sorry I can't marry you because I did something so bad that I must be punished. I can't allow myself to be happy when my brother is dead because of me." He might say, "I'm not the marrying kind," or "I'm no good for you." It is the wound which causes the mistaken belief and the mistaken belief that causes the character to construct a mask which will keep anyone from seeing the wound that never healed.

It is the job of each character's perfect opposite to get the character to recognize that their belief is flawed. This cognition causes them to consider developing a new belief system that allows them to accept who they really are and become self-actualized, happy and fulfilled. Only then, are they capable of finding happiness with the other.

The process of discovering the mistaken belief is difficult and includes lots of failed tries with some progress. Think about it. How often do you overturn your belief system? I'm betting it's not as often as you change your motor oil. In other words, you don't or you won't without a fight or without really compelling evidence that you were wrong. Same deal with Mr. and Mrs. Right.

Example time!

### **Finding Nemo**

The main character here is Marlin, a not-so-funny clown fish who has lost his wife and all but one of their offspring to a barracuda attack. His wound is his inability to protect those he loves. Upon regaining consciousness, he finds only one egg left with a swimming embryo inside and makes his promise. He will be certain that nothing ever happens to his son. His mistaken belief that arises from this accident is that, to protect his boy, he must prevent him from any and all dangers and this includes keeping him from school, friends and a normal fishy-life. As a result his outer self becomes an overbearing, overprotective parent who drives his son crazy and makes the other fish parents raise what amounts to a fishy-eyebrow. He's a kill-joy which is ironic for a clown fish. The reason the folks at Disney opened with Marlin and his wife is so that you can see that he was not always a kill-joy and then see why he has become one. After

Nemo is captured by divers, Marlin's journeys with Dori, a blue fish with short-term memory loss, helps him recognize the error of his ways. When he confesses that he promised his son that he'd make sure nothing ever happened to him, she is confused and says, "That's a funny thing to promise. If nothing ever happens to him, then nothing will ever happen to him." Another character, a 150-year-old surfer-dude sea turtle considers how to judge when your offspring are ready to be on their own, says, "Well, you never really know, but when they know, you know. You know?" Later, while they cling to the tongue of a whale, she relays the prophetic message from the whale that "It's time to let go." Through his journey, Marlin discovers that it is his over-protectiveness that drove his son to take the silly chance that caused his capture and that, by trying to protect Nemo, he has actually put him in danger. This 'ah-ha' moment leads to the change in his beliefs. By the stories conclusion, Marlin has relinquished his outer self and rediscovered the fun-loving, playful clownfish he used to be before his wife's death. He is a confident father, making Nemo a self-assured fish.

### **Lethal Weapon**

Marty Riggs is the crazy, suicidal cop partner that no one wants. His wound is the paralyzing grief caused by the death of his beloved wife of eleven years, killed in an auto accident. He really does not know if he wants to live or die. Riggs' mistaken belief is that the only way to end his crushing pain is by dying. This leads him to his crazy, suicidal outer public self. He takes unnecessary risks, flirts with death by jumping off buildings and taking on snipers single handedly. He seems to be a man with a death wish, but when he puts his service revolver in his mouth, he fails to pull the trigger because his inner self wants to live and be happy again. His partner, Lt. Murtaugh (Danny Glover) first believes Riggs has a death wish, but glimpse hope in Riggs's reaction and interaction with his family. Murtaugh now has a reason to hope and tries to connect by gradually inviting Riggs into his home. In these moments, the men connect and Murtaugh sees that Riggs could become what he was, the funny, fun-loving man he was before his wife's death. Lt. Murtaugh's willingness to include Riggs in the life of his boisterous, loving family helps Riggs connect with people and life again. In the final scene Riggs gives Murtaugh the hollow-pointed bullet with which he had planned to end his life, signaling his return to life and Murtaugh invites him in for Christmas dinner.

### **Pirates of the Caribbean, Search for the Black Pearl**

Elizabeth Swan is the proper daughter of the governor. Her wound was being onboard a ship that was attacked by pirates and, instead of being frightened, she was exhilarated and has developed a fascination with pirates. At her core, she is an adventuress, which is extremely inappropriate for a young lady of her social position. She must hide who she is, which she does symbolically by hiding the piece of Aztec treasure which she stole (like any good pirate) from a survivor of the attacked vessel. She later wears it about her neck, secreting it (and her true self) beneath her outer self, represented by the elaborate new dress and corset her father presents to her to wear to the promotion ceremony of her young man. Her mistaken belief is that she must act like a proper lady to be accepted. Outwardly and publicly she is the dutiful daughter to the governor and perfect match for her young man, Commadore James Norrington. From the outside she looks like the luckiest girl in Port Royal. But her inner self is at war with the outer. She finds the corset (representing her mask) constraining and ridiculous.

She knows she should marry Norrington but is secretly taken by Will Turner, her social inferior, a blacksmith who she helped rescue from a pirate ship. Her inner self is adventurous, brave, cunning, lawless and, in other words—a pirate. From the moment of her fall from the parapets, and her symbolic death, she begins to become her true self. It is no coincidence that the one who removes her shackles (corset) is a pirate. Jack Sparrow liberates her and sets her on the journey toward becoming who she is meant to be.

**Conclusion:**

Movies and books provide excellent examples of well crafted characters who are made for each other. But it doesn't happen by accident. Their opposite must be able to glimpse who the other character is at their core or who they could be if they were willing to face their wound and topple their belief system. In order for that to happen, their mistaken belief must cause them trouble by keeping them from having the object of their desire. They must be forced into situations that are uncomfortable and that make them question if their belief system is correct. Once they recognize that they might be mistaken about this particular belief they must make the decision to change. Change is hard and most people first try the easy way out. Some attempts to change will blow up in their face, especially if they are trying to do so by holding fast to their outer self while trying to get what the inner self needs. Some efforts will be successful. But as the author, you need to show them making these attempts at moving toward their inner self and show the results of these endeavors. Eventually each character must face a choice: change their beliefs or lose their love interest.

Living as the inner self is glorious and terrifying all at once. Scared heroes often retreat to the familiar ground of the outer mask. That is why a scene that involves showing his or her true self, physically or by sharing some deep emotional truth is often followed by a pulling back, a retreat of sorts and a clash.

All of this means that you need to think about who your character appears to be, who they really are and what is keeping them from being happy. Then you need to think of a partner who will give them a reason to face their fears and come out a better person for it.

So there you have it. The push and pull between the protagonists makes the magic. The push of conflict that comes from two vital and worthy goals that are in opposition and the pull of two souls looking past their differences to glimpse the inner self.

Nail these two elements and you will create two characters who can overcome real, compelling, nearly insurmountable differences to connect despite all rational and reasonable arguments to the contrary. You will, in fact, be creating a satisfying read that will end up on someone's keeper shelf.

I hope you enjoyed this article. This and other articles on the craft of writing are available on my website on the RESOURCES page at [www.jennakernan.com](http://www.jennakernan.com)