

## Writing Outside the Box – How to Create Unique Paranormal Characters

Paranormal romance and urban fantasy books are extremely popular these days. Editors, agents, and readers just can't seem to get enough of them, yours truly included. There are tons of paranormal books on the market right now, for both adults and young adults, with more coming out every month. Whether you're trying to break in and sell your first manuscript or are publishing your tenth book, the question remains the same – how do you make your book stand out from the crowd?

You might consider writing outside the paranormal “box.” In my opinion, there are four magical creatures or constructs that form a “box” that many books fall into – fairies/fey, werewolves/shapeshifters, witches/wizards, and vampires. Many paranormal books have one or more of these creatures (or some variation or combination of) in them.

To me, the great thing about writing fantasy – whether it's paranormal romance, urban fantasy, or young adult fantasy – is that you can *make up the whole thing*. If you want to write about sci-fi centaurs that are the love slaves to a tribe of elven maidens, *you can*. If you want to write about bloodthirsty goblins that eat the wings off pixies and frighten small cats, *you can*. If you want to write about warrior dwarves that live in skyscrapers, *you can*. All you have to do is make your world believable and your characters entertaining.

So how do you find your paranormal character/construct? How do you break out of the paranormal box or create something new inside the box? Here are some steps that have helped me. Maybe they'll help you, too.

■ **Step One:** Think about the kinds of paranormal stories and characters that you like best. I love fairy tales, mythology, and comic books, along with action-packed tales about spies and assassins. Over the years, I've read and watched lots of books, movies, and television shows about assassins, both fantasy-based and otherwise. And the more I read and saw, the more I wanted to change the stories. Like create an assassin character who was okay with her profession, someone who had made peace with being a bad guy because she knew that there were worse people in the world than her—people that she could protect other innocent folks from.

Then, one day, it hit me. I could write my own assassin character, with my own magic and world building. And thus, Gin Blanco and the dark, gritty world of my Elemental Assassin urban fantasy series were born. In short, if you like reading or watching it, you'll probably like writing it, too.

■ **Step Two:** Once you've identified your favorite type of story, decide what sort of paranormal character/construct you want to focus on. If you like fairy tales, you could write about princesses or giants or trolls. If you like epic fantasy, you could write about ogres or elves or dwarves. If you like urban fantasy, you could write about gremlins or gargoyles or dragons. The great thing about writing paranormal stories is that the possibilities are *endless*.

When I decided to write a young adult series, I thought it would be fun to write something mythology-based, but I struggled to come up with an idea. I love writing first-person heroines, so I thought what if I had a smart, plucky, slightly snarky heroine and put her in a world full of

ancient warriors and magic that she didn't really believe in? What if she was a Gypsy and got shipped off to a school for the descendants of ancient warriors like Amazons, Spartans, Valkyries, and more? What if there was an evil god who was trying to take over the world? What if my Gypsy girl heroine was the key to stopping this evil god? What if she was stronger and more of a warrior than she ever thought possible? That was the beginning of the idea for my Mythos Academy young adult urban fantasy series.

So always think about what kind of paranormal character/construct will fit in well with the overall type of story and magical world that you want to write.

■ **Step Three:** Make it your own. Take your paranormal character/construct and give it your own personal stamp or twist. People say there's nothing new under the sun, and they're right. Everything's been done before in some way, shape, or form. But it hasn't been done exactly the way that *you* are going to do it. So go for it, no matter how out there it seems.

If you want your water sprite to sink like a stone whenever she tries to swim, do it. If you want your giant to be a disco fan, do it. If you want your fairies to be miniature mercenaries, that's quite all right. Just make it unique and memorable. Go big, or go home.

Also, think about your own personal interests and consider giving your character a hobby that ties into one of those things. For example, I love cooking and writing about food, so I decided to have Gin Blanco, the heroine of my Elemental Assassin series, run a restaurant in her spare time. That ties in with my own interest in cooking and gives Gin a good reason to have lots of knives lying around. If you're interested in something in real life, you'll probably enjoy writing about it and sharing your knowledge and passion with others.

■ **Step Four:** Think about your overall voice and writing style. Do you pen slapstick comedy? Serious drama? Pedal-to-the-medal action? Consider giving your characters paranormal powers that tie into these things.

For comedy, you might give your character a paranormal power/ability that constantly malfunctions. For drama, maybe someone's power is more of a curse than a blessing. Active, explosive powers like telekinesis or the ability to throw energy balls might come in handy in an action-driven book. It's always good when stuff blows up.

I love writing books that feature lots of action, magic, and big, explosive fight scenes. Writing about an assassin and a Gypsy girl who's training to be a warrior gives me the opportunity to create those kinds of books and scenes.

■ **Step Five:** Think about what you do well as a writer, whether it's snappy dialogue, sizzling romance, or lush, elegant descriptions. Then, consider how these things can tie in with your paranormal character/construct and the genre that you want to write in.

As much as I love reading epic fantasy, I'm not very good at writing it. When I first had the idea for my Elemental Assassin urban fantasy series, I tried several times to write it as an epic fantasy, but it just wasn't working. But when I decided to try writing the story as an urban fantasy instead, set in a modern world with cars, electricity, and the like, that's when everything really came together for me.

So know your strengths as a writer, and let your paranormal character/construct bring out the best in you.

■ **Staying inside the box:** Don't worry – it's okay to stay inside the paranormal box. I know, I know, I've been talking about breaking out of the box. But the box isn't good or bad. It's just where many books fall, in my opinion. If you want to do a vampire or wizard story, you can. After all, you're the one writing it. Authors like Stephanie Meyer, J.K. Rowling, and countless others have won legions of fans writing about vampires, wizards, and more.

Whether you write inside or outside the paranormal box, what I'm saying is this – write what you love and give it your own special spin. That's where the magic really is.

Got questions or comments? E-mail me at [jennifer@jenniferestep.com](mailto:jennifer@jenniferestep.com).

Jennifer Estep writes the Elemental Assassin urban fantasy series for Pocket. Books in the series are *Spider's Bite* (2010), *Web of Lies* (2010), and *Venom* (2010). *Tangled Threads*, the fourth book, was published in May 2011, while *Spider's Revenge*, the fifth book, will be released in October 2011.

Jennifer also writes the Mythos Academy young adult urban fantasy series for Kensington. The first book, *Touch of Frost*, will be out in August 2011, while the second book, *Kiss of Frost*, will hit shelves in December 2011. *First Frost*, a prequel e-story to the series, will be released in July 2011. Visit [www.jenniferestep.com](http://www.jenniferestep.com) for excerpts and more.

## **Paranormal Romance and Urban Fantasy – What’s the Difference Anyway?**

Paranormal romance and urban fantasy are two hot genres right now. But they feature so many of the same elements – magic, strong characters, and sizzling romance – that many folks wonder exactly what the differences are between the two. Read on for my take:

**The romance:** In a paranormal romance, the hero and heroine wind up together, and they achieve their happily ever after at the end of one book. There can be other secondary characters that don’t get or stay together, but the hero and heroine will be a loving, committed couple at the end of the book.

However, this isn’t always the case in an urban fantasy. Couples can get together, break up, make up, die, and more over the course of several books. Multiple love interests are also common in urban fantasy stories. A romantic happily ever after isn’t guaranteed at the end of the first book, although many authors plan for their characters to commit to each other at some point in the series – it just might take a while.

**The overall plot:** The name says it all. A paranormal romance focuses on, well, the romance. The interaction between the hero and heroine and the two of them falling in love is the key focus of the book – or at least a very significant portion of the plot. In addition to the romance, most of the other plot threads are also wrapped up by the end of the book or set the stage for future couples and conflicts in the series. Plus, there’s usually just one hero per heroine per book (and vice versa).

Not true for urban fantasy. Many urban fantasies feature a strong romantic element, but it’s often a subplot next to the main plot of saving the city, world, etc. Urban fantasies tend to have multiple subplots (romantic and otherwise) that can stretch out over several books. And often, the hero or heroine will have multiple love interests throughout the course of a series or even in a single book.

**The point of view:** Generally speaking, most paranormal romances are written from the third-person point of view, showing both the hero and heroine’s thoughts and feelings.

Many urban fantasies are written from the first-person point of view, showing only the main hero or heroine’s thoughts and feelings.

**Young adult vs. adult books:** Young adult books feature the same kinds of creatures, magic, world building, and romance that adult books do. Usually, though, things like sex, violence, and language are toned down a bit in young adult books.

**Exceptions to the rules:** But rules are made to be broken, so keep in mind that there are exceptions on both sides to each one of these general rules. Who knows? Breaking the rules just might work for you in your own writing.

## Fantasy Reading 101

Want to write paranormal romance or some other type of fantasy? Check out these books to see how other authors approach everything from fairies to vampires for adult and young adult readers. Many of these books fit into several different categories, as they feature a variety of paranormal characters/constructs. This is by no means an exhaustive list of all the paranormal books out there – just a place to start. Half the fun is discovering new authors on your own.

### Epic fantasy

Featuring elves, dwarves, trolls, etc., usually set in a medieval-type world with swords and sorcery:

- The **Shannara** series by Terry Brooks
- The **Elenium** series by David Eddings
- The **Wheel of Time** series by Robert Jordan

### Fairies/fey

Featuring fairies/fey and more in a variety of settings and time periods:

- The **Iron Fey** series by Julie Kagawa
- The **Wicked Lovely** series by Melissa Marr
- The **Fever** series by Karen Marie Moning

### Funny fantasy

Featuring wizards, warriors, and more in a variety of settings and time periods, but with a humorous, often spoof-like tone:

- The **Jig the Goblin** series by Jim C. Hines
- **The Unhandsome Prince** and other books by John Moore
- The **Dicsworld** series by Terry Pratchett

### Futuristic fantasy and science fiction

Featuring characters who use magic, technology, or a combination of both in a variety of settings:

- The **HeartMate** series by Robin D. Owens
- The **Dante Valentine** series by Lilith Saintcrow
- **Games of Command** and other books by Linnea Sinclair

### Gods/demons/angels

Featuring gods, demons, angels, and more in a variety of settings:

- The **Demonica** series by Larissa Ione
- The **Demon-Hunting Soccer Mom** series by Julie Kenner
- The **Guild Hunter** series by Nalini Singh

### Paranormal romance

Featuring demons, witches, vampires, and more in a variety of settings:

- The **Immortals After Dark** series by Kresley Cole
- The **Dark-Hunter** series by Sherrilyn Kenyon
- The **Psy/Changeling** series by Nalini Singh

### Urban fantasy

Featuring witches, wizards, vampires, shapeshifters, and more in a modern-day setting. Can range from humorous to serious, although most urban fantasies feature a dark, gritty tone:

- The **Kate Daniels** series by Ilona Andrews
- **Women of the Otherworld** series by Kelley Armstrong
- The **Jane Yellowrock** series by Faith Hunter

### Vampires

Featuring vampires with a variety of mythologies and rules, ranging in tone from humorous to serious:

- The **Night Huntress** series by Jeaniene Frost
- The **Argeneau Vampires** series by Lynsay Sands
- The **Black Dagger Brotherhood** series by J.R. Ward

### Werewolves/shapeshifters

Featuring people/creatures who can turn into werewolves, shift forms, and more:

- The **Riley Jensen, Guardian** series by Keri Arthur
- The **Mercy Thompson** series by Patricia Briggs
- The **Nightcreature** series by Lori Handeland

### Witches/wizards

Featuring witches and wizards in a variety of settings:

- The **Dresden Files** by Jim Butcher
- The **Hollows** series by Kim Harrison
- The **Harry Potter** series by J.K. Rowling

### Young adult

Featuring everything from princesses to witches in a variety of settings:

- **White Cat** and other books by Holly Black
- **Beastly** and other books by Alex Flinn
- **The False Princess** by Eilis O'Neal

There are tons of authors who write these types of paranormal books and more. Go to the bookstore and browse around. You'll find books about any number of paranormal

creatures/constructs and the magical worlds  
they inhabit. Happy reading and writing!