

Confessions of a Romance Novelist

by Kim Stamm

"My name is Roberta Crawford and I am a romance novelist." As I spoke this simple sentence at the weekly Tuesday night meeting of Romance Novelists Anonymous, I felt the weight of the world being lifted off my shoulders. I was finally able to admit that I had a problem, an addiction to writing romance novels. Now you may think it's impossible to be addicted to writing love stories, but it happens to hundreds of people each year. Let me tell you my story.

I was like any other kid until I turned ten. Yes, it was on my tenth birthday, January 3, 1972, that my life began its eventual down-hill slide. That was the day Peggy Rogers gave me the book, *Forever*, by Judy Blume. She became my inspiration from that day on. Judy's book turned my whole life around.

Well, after I finished *Forever*, I just couldn't wait to find another romance novel and thank goodness they started coming out with those great books like *Susie's Dilemma*. The story-line went something like this: Should Susie date the dull football player, Jeff, because he's cute and will make her popular or should she go out with the guy she really likes, Ned, even though he's the President of the Math and Science Club and carries a calculator around in his pocket. Or, do you remember *It Couldn't Be Me?* I cried so hard when Julie stopped being popular because her fellow cheerleaders wouldn't let her date the boy she really liked, that my mother threatened to take away all of my romance novels. Oh, how could they have been so cruel to her? I've never truly forgiven Katie, Krissy, and Lindsay for that.

Anyway, to continue with my story. All through junior high and high school I read every heart-breaking romance tale I could find and no matter how many tears I cried, I still kept going until another fateful day in my life, February 14, 1980! For some mysterious reason I bought a copy of "True Confessions" along with my weekly romance novel from the magazine and book section at Wal-Mart. Now I know you're thinking, "She made this date up, Valentine's Day, really," but I swear to you that on that fateful day I found the day that would change my entire life, Dr. I.M. Amorice. No, he didn't become my lover, but, instead, it was his advertisement in the February 1980 issue of "True Confessions" that first started me on my addiction to writing romance novels.

After coming home after my weekly trip to Wal-Mart (I always went on Sunday so I could begin the new week with a new love story), I sat down in my favorite chair, a pink armchair made out of that stuff that leaves a funny floral pattern on the backs of your legs, and anyway, I stared at the cover of the magazine for about two minutes trying to decide what story I should read first. I finally decided to read "My Boyfriend Left Me for My Twin Sister," first and save, "How I Made Our High School Quarterback Love Me" for later. Well, after finishing the first couple of pages of the story, (I was crying at this point because Shelley's boyfriend, John, had left her for her twin sister, Kelly, and those two heartless people eloped to get married at the Chapel of Love in Las Vegas!), I hurriedly tried to find its continuation on page 52 so I could see how Shelley dealt with her tragic situation, when one of those little, annoying pieces of paper that magazines stick in the middle asking for subscriptions kept me from turning the page. Well, after tearing it out I almost turned to the end of the story when there HE was, staring at me from the pages of "True Confessions." Dr. I.M. Amorie. And he was asking me, yes, me, to begin a career as a romance novelist! The title, "You Too Can Be a Romance Novelist," kept my attention for a while. Finally, I pulled my eyes away and read how I could become the next Judy Blume or Danielle Steele. It all seemed so easy! All I had to do was send in \$50 and Dr. Amorie would send me his 20-page booklet on how to become a professional novelist. After reading the Doctor's guide I could start writing love stories! When I had completed a novel, Dr. Amorie would edit it for \$100 and then he would publish the final work at a 49% commission rate! At that time I thought God had sent Dr. Amorie into my life. You see, I was a high school senior at the time and I really didn't know what I wanted to do with my life and since I loved romance novels, I thought this opportunity would give me a chance to create some of the happiness that people like Judy Blume and Danielle Steele do with their novels.

Well, needless to say, I wrote right away for my booklet and I practically camped out by our mailbox waiting to begin what I thought would be a fabulous career as a romance novelist. The booklet arrived in just a couple of weeks and for a naive writer, reading that booklet was like finding the Fountain of Youth! Although I signed an agreement not to reveal Dr. Amorie's secrets, I feel that you should know the tricks of the romance novel trade.

Dr. Amorie began his booklet with the statement, "Anyone can be a romance novelist." At the time that sounded great to me because I really needed to get my career off the ground and start earning a living. After that catchy opening, he went on to give us, his students, the formula for a successful romance novel. He said that our novels should have exactly twelve chapters, not eleven, not thirteen, but exactly twelve. The reason for

that, he said, is that our story should take place in four parts, each containing three chapters. Sounds easy enough, doesn't it? He even went as far as to give us what he called, "Dr. Amorie's Recipe," a brief description of what each part needed to include. Part One must have the boy meeting the girl. Again, easy enough. In Part Two, a love relationship begins to grow, but in Part Three, the lovers are torn apart by some sort of tragic event. (i.e., a wife, a war, or maybe a jealous ex-boyfriend, etc...). Finally, in Part Four, chapters 10-12, the lovers are re-united and live happily ever after! Dr. Amorie was right, anyone could do this. After giving us the recipe, Dr. Amorie then gave us some "ingredients" to throw in. The setting, he told us, should always take place in New York City, California, (Los Angeles or San Francisco, preferably), or a European city such as London or Paris. A good story needs to contain two out of these three locations. Character names were another of Dr. Amorie's ingredients. The girls, he said, should have an unusual or exotic name like Samantha or Gwendolyn, while the boys should be named something like Geoffrey (notice the spelling) or Michael (no nicknames please). Well, Dr. Amorie had given me the hardest parts of the romance novel, the plot, the characters, and the setting, so all I had to do was connect all the dots and create the whole picture. Bits and pieces of the storylines were running through my head before I even finished the booklet so I felt confident that I could produce a romance novel and begin my life as an author.

Now at this point you're probably wondering what my parents thought of all of this. Well, to tell you the truth, they weren't too excited about the whole deal. But they agreed to let me try for six months and if by that time I hadn't written a novel, I would have to go to secretarial school or business college and get what they called a "real" profession.

Well, my first novel, *Desiree's Desire*, was the hardest one to write, (I'm sure you can understand that), but it wasn't long before Dr. Amorie's recipe began to work for me. Soon I began to write a novel every two months or so and the results began to show. You probably even saw my name a hundred times if you ever walked past those romance novels in Hook's or Wal-Mart. My stories were always next to something like "Teen-Mania" and below those little self-help books titled "100 Ways to Lose Inches from Your Thighs." By the time my six months were up, I was able to move out and live on my own with the money from my novels. My first apartment was a joke. It was actually a two-room place above our neighbor's garage. The wallpaper was a huge floral pattern that had turned yellow with age and was peeling in some places, but it was home to me and the mice.

I didn't have a chance to live there long, though, because soon my novels were the hottest things since sliced bread. I had surpassed the level of Dr.

Amorie and I was able to find myself a publisher in New York City. I had hit the big time in romance writing.

I got the first taste of the public life when my publisher arranged a cross-country bookstore tour for me. The number of fans who turned out to see me at these stops was amazing! I didn't know there were so many middle-aged housewives who wore curlers in their hair and actually did go out in public in their pink chenille bathrobes. But, I expected to see that type of fan. What truly shocked me was the number of professional men and women who read my novels. At one stop, in downtown Chicago, I had three lawyers, all dressed in their blue suits with red ties, who stood in line for over an hour to talk to me and have me sign my latest book, *Samantha's Secret*. They said that they read my romances after work every day in order to relax.

It was about this time that I went to the first meeting of the 'Roberta Crawford Fan Club.' The first chapter of the club was in Cleveland, Ohio, and it was formed by the women who lived in a subdivision there called *Legendary Hills*. I was late to the meeting because all the houses looked the same to me and I got lost. I think I counted only three different styles of houses and maybe four different colors of paint. Well, anyway, I was finally able to locate the house just because I noticed about three Buick Regals that had the famous "Mary Kay" sticker on the rear window. I was right, that was the place.

Well, once inside, I wished I was back outside again, wandering through the streets of *Legendary Hills*. The women, who had certainly dressed for the occasion in their polyester pantsuits, acted like teenagers at a Bon Jovi rock concert. They grabbed at my clothes, begged me for autographs, and they all had to tell me how romance novels helped them make it through the day. The secretary of the club, Mary Liz, I think her name was, told me that one day she knew that she would meet some new man who "will whisk me away from Cleveland and together, we'll live on a yacht named *Desire* in the calm, blue Mediterranean Sea." Her pitiful look of hope made me uneasy for awhile but I soon got over it and quickly made my escape from the fan club members in *Legendary Hills*.

Soon, my life began to be its own, life-like romance novel. I became addicted to my writing and the lifestyle that accompanied it. I was now living in Los Angeles, but I flew to New York at least once a week to keep in touch with my publisher. When I wasn't somewhere above Nebraska or Colorado, I was either writing my next romance or creating a social life that would have shocked Marilyn Monroe. Film Festivals, Night Club Openings, and the best parties that L.A. and New York had to offer were all part of my new life. I was becoming so famous that my name was even on the "Wheel of Fortune" under the title "Famous Person." A housewife from

Cleveland got the puzzle right. And, of course, the men were there, too. Blonde, clean-cut, soon -to-be actors who needed to be seen often escorted me to these events, and of course, a few of these became more than just escorts. It was a wonderful, whirlwind life, just like one of my novels, until a famous talk-show host made me see the light.

When the Oprah Winfrey people called me and asked me to be a guest on their show I was thrilled. After my novels, Oprah was fast becoming the hottest thing in the media world. I felt honored that Oprah wanted me to be a part of her popular show, so I eagerly accepted. Well, the taping of the show turned out to be the most eye-opening day of my life. There I was, sitting in a chair, in front of an audience filled with even more middle-aged housewives, expecting Oprah to just glorify my novels, when the camera man said, "Rolling." Instead of hearing praise, I heard Oprah say, "Millions of women read romance novels habitually. They live, breathe, and eat the lives of the characters, and so many times a suburban wife and mother of four will forget she has a life in the real world. She'll become so involved with the romance world that the house goes uncleaned and her marriage falls apart. Today I have two guests whose lives were completely destroyed after they became addicted to these dime-store romances. I also have with me, today, a very famous romance novelist, Miss Roberta Crawford, who is here to tell us what motivates her to write. Please welcome my guests on today's show."

I was flabbergasted! Listening to those women tell their terrible stories made me feel terrible. I never knew that my readers took my novels so seriously! One woman who called in said that she left her home, husband, and kids to move out to California so she could meet the kind of man that I wrote about in all of my novels. When she got to L.A. she was forced to become a prostitute to make money, but she continued to dream. Eventually, her husband went out there to find her and take her home. Now that's a true love story. I began to feel so guilty that I began apologizing for my work. It didn't take long for my fairy-tale career to end after that. After the show aired on national television my career fell apart. Instead of novels, I had to begin writing stories for "True Confessions." Even my fan club in Cleveland broke up.

It was when I was back in my two-room apartment over Mrs. Peabody's garage that I realized I needed help. I was spending every day watching Vanna turn letters ion the "Wheel of Fortune," and after that game show, I watched Bob Barker show his showcases on the "Price is Right." I had reached the bottom, the absolute pits.

I was saved, though. One day, while flipping through the Yellow Pages to find a pizza place that delivered, I came across an ad for Romance Novelist's Anonymous. Realizing that I needed to turn my life around, I found the phone under a pile of empty potato chip bags and called their number (RU4-LOVE).

Well, that was a year ago and it's been ten months since I confessed that I was a romance novelist. I started business school six months ago so I've taken steps to turn my life around. I am now able to realize that I did more harm than good by creating fantasies for people, because instead of simply enjoying them, some people used my love stories as an escape from a somewhat dreary life. I want to apologize and say that your own everyday life is a much better romance novel than I could ever write.