

Inside Scoop: Analyze Openings from the Agent, Bookseller and Reader
Perspective and Problem Solve as a Writer
2010 RWA National Survey of Agents, Booksellers and Readers

Data compiled by Robin Perini and Claire Cavanaugh
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Definitions

Average = Total divided by number of numbers

Median = Middle value

Range = largest and smallest values

Agent Data

Special thanks to the following agencies for participating in the survey and for allowing us to use your names. (Order of agents has no correlation with order of answers below).

- Alexandra Machinist, Linda Chester Literary Agency
 - Jill Marsal, Marsal Lyon Literary Agency
 - Sharene Martin-Brown of Wylie-Merrick Literary Agency
 - Laurie McLean, Larsen-Pomada Literary Agency
 - Elizabeth Pomada, Larsen-Pomada Literary Agency
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 - Adele Horwitz, Larsen-Pomada Literary Agency, agency reader/former editor
1. I usually know within ____ pages if I have a book/manuscript I'm interested in reading.
Median: 2 pages
Average: 7 pages
Range: 1-20 pages
Comments:
 - The first page tells if the author can write.
 - Beginnings can be bad. I read more, and here and there.
 2. I will, more of than not, read at least _____ (Pages/chapter/scene/proposal, etc.) before making a final decision to NOT continue reading a manuscript.
Median: 12.5 pages
Average: 16.3 pages
Range: 3-40 pages
Comments:
 - 1 chapter or to the end of the sample

3. What percentage of manuscripts do you know will NOT work by page 1? (100% indicates that you can always tell on page 1 if a manuscript will NOT work.)
 Median: 85%
 Average: 64%
 Range: 0-99.9 %
 Comments:
 - 0% - comment said: you can always eliminate a first page, prologue or chapter.
 - Over half responded > 90%

4. What are the most common reasons that you can tell a manuscript will NOT work on page 1?
 - Poor writing, incomplete sentences, lots of adjectives each sentence.
 - No hook. Not enough dramatic tension. Too much like so many other plots. Misspellings & poor grammar.
 - Lengthy narrative (usually "setting the scene" with too many details); dull opening with no change (change can be subtle but something must be happening); writing style that doesn't engage; writer is telling and not showing the story
 - Bad writing, cliché opening, trite character names, poor grammar.
 - Bad prose, wrong word choices, bad grammar and punctuation. Boring, flat, no voice
 - you can't; unless topic is impossible

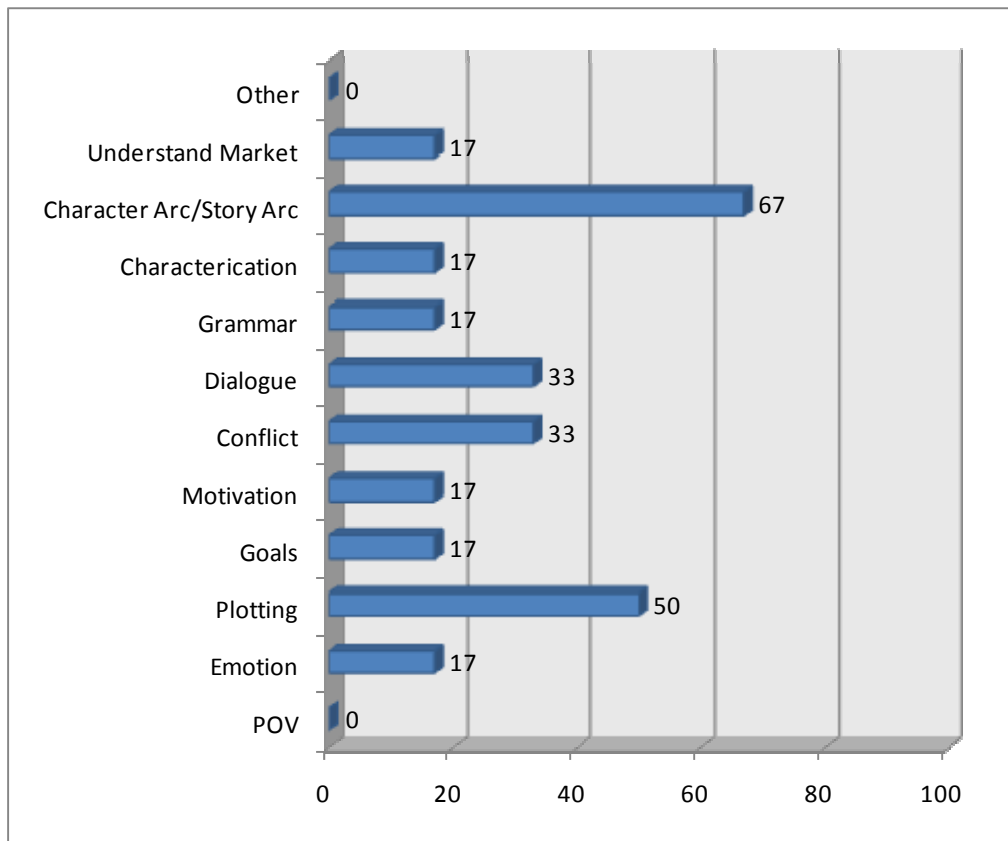
5. What makes you ask for a proposal vs. a complete manuscript based on the initial pages or query submitted?
 - For non-fiction, I request proposals, For fiction, I request 20 pages, then if those are promising- strong writing, good hook, interesting characters, I request the remainder.
 - I usually ask for a complete manuscript if I loved the first 10 pages. What's a proposal?
 - I usually prefer a complete ms unless I'm dealing with a multi, multi pubbed author.
 - Excitement of concept, writing background, strength of query.
 - I ask for a proposal if it's nonfiction. I ask for a complete manuscript if the first 10 pages make me want to keep turning the pages.

6. What story information do you like introduced quickly in the book/manuscript and why?
 - I like to know who the characters are, where the story is set, and what is the main plotline so that the reader is situated and knows what to expect or why they should keep reading.
 - The external conflict. The hero and heroine. I want to know I'm going to be entertained and will enjoy the ride of the story with these characters.
 - I need a strong sense of character and conflict. Those two elements of fiction alone will sell a book.
 - The conflict and high concept.
 - I need to know that there IS a story and that there is a real Voice almost immediately. It should hook the reader on page one.
 - a character (protagonist) and a problem

7. Many writers make the following mistakes, so that I never get past the first few chapters.

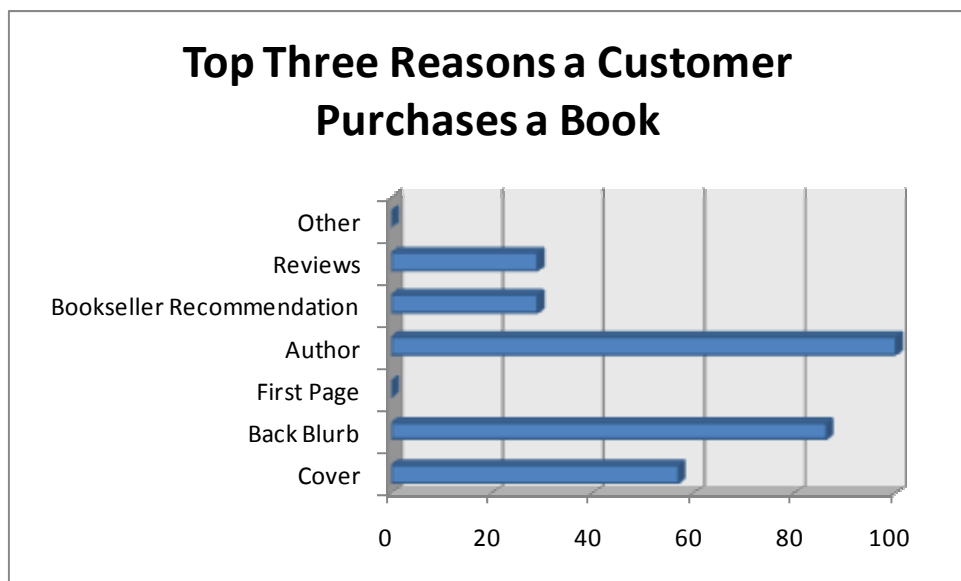
- Top Reasons
 - Too much background information and set up before the story gets going
 - Too wordy
 - Dull (no change) or cliché opening
 - boring concept
 - No tension
 - too much buildup of background
- Other Reasons
 - too much telling and not showing- avoid putting the reader at a distance
 - Telling the story as opposed to showing it
 - Non-engaging writing style
 - Non-engaging characters
 - Lack of originality in at least one of the elements of fiction
 - No pace
 - No voice
 - No story

8. What three craft skills do you wish writers would learn the most. (Charts shows percentage)



Bookseller Data

1. What are the top three reasons a customer will purchase a book? (Charts show percentage. Note that booksellers responded to their top 3 choices). Also note, although first page is not one of top three reasons, see question 2 for further information.



2. What percentage of your customers read the first page or skim the opening of the book before purchasing?

Median: 57.5%

Average: 60%

Range: 0-75 %

Comments:

- I don't read first page, I go by author, cover, blurb and recommendations.
- Opening lines come well after reviews, familiarity with author's previous works, and the particular story line (from back blurb).

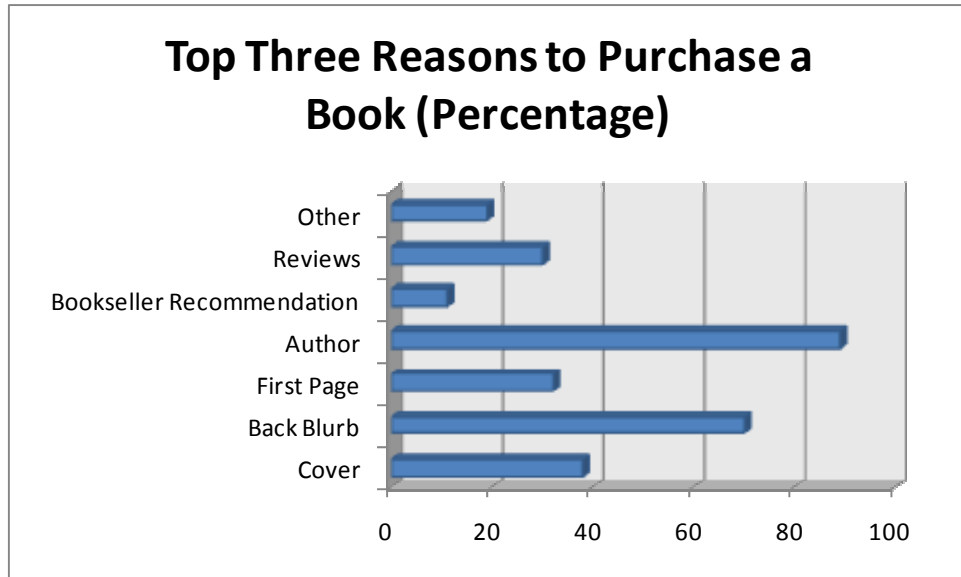
3. What's hot and what's not?

- **HOT**
 - historicals are baaaack
 - romantic suspense
 - hot romance and some paranormal romance
 - Vampires (and most supernatural), Stephenie Meyer, Steig Larsson,
 - I still enjoy my historicals and a good RS.
 - Steampunk
 - Angels are hot in all paranormal type genres(YA, romance, urban, sci-fi).
 - Shapeshifters are at least branching out from the moth-eaten werewolves. I count that as a step forward.

- NOT
 - some paranormal romance where the created universe does not grab you
 - space romance
 - some shape-shifter romance
 - certain romance authors who have tumbled to cruelty
 - Getting very tired of vampires.

Reader Data

1. What are the top three reasons you would choose to purchase a book?



- Other includes:
 - Someone read it and passed it on to me
 - Friends
 - Recommendation from a friend that likes the same authors I do.
 - Word of mouth.
 - Friend /family recommendation
 - endings, crazy but I always read them first
 - Large print
 - Author first and foremost; actually reviews and cover are kind of neck-and-neck for me. A great cover might make me pick up a book and read the back blurb and first page.
 - It is often the cover that catches my eye, but if the back blurb and the first page don't measure up, I might pass it by.
 - Maybe Oprah

2. Do you read the first page or skim the opening of the book?

- Yes – 65%
- No – 35%

3. I usually know within _____ pages if I have a book I'm interested in purchasing.

Median: 2.5 pages

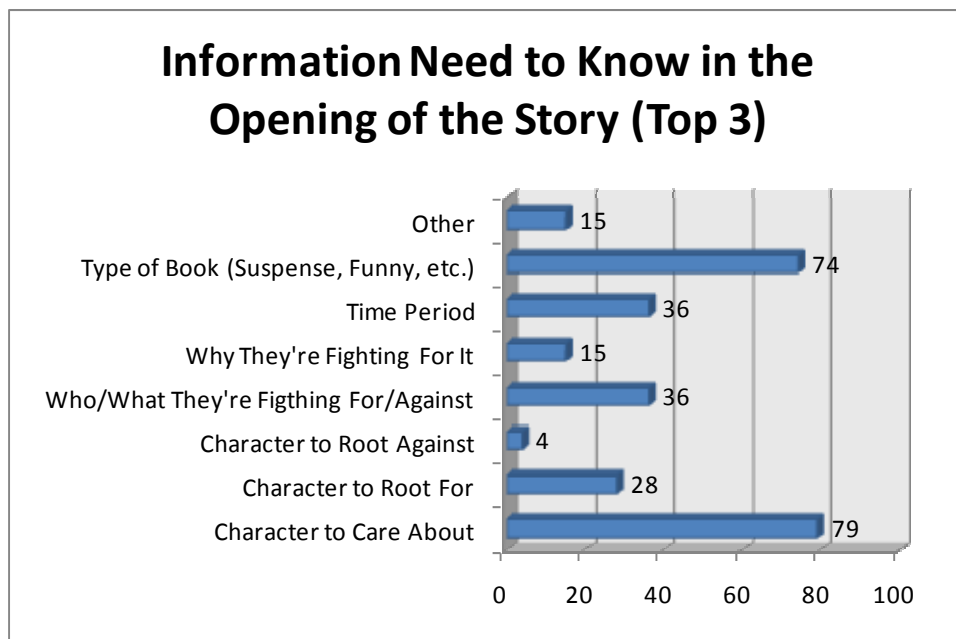
Average: 5.6 pages

Range: 0-first 2 chapters

Comments:

- If I'm having a hard time getting into the story, I read the first two chapters.

- The back blurb usually sells it to me.
 - I buy books written by authors I or my husband enjoy reading, otherwise I check the unknowns out at the library. Budget thing.
 - I skim pages looking for specific things (like hero Point of View). It might take me longer than a couple of pages before I buy a book.
 - Usually the first few pages; if it's been highly recommended and it doesn't quite grab me yet, I will give it more time.
 - If I can put the book down after 10 pages, I will be slow to go back.
 - Don't read pages. Trust author or a knowledgeable friend's recommendation.
4. What information do you need to know in the opening of a story? Please choose your top 3.



- Other includes:
 - Books based on historical events with could-possibly-have-happened events thrown in
 - If the storyline grabs me.
 - Quality of writing
 - Is it going to be exciting?
 - Heroine's hair color
 - Great narrative drive.
 - I read historicals and some women's fiction. I write romantic women's fiction. I like a mix of elements but upper most is the believability of the story. If it is on the edge, then the author must give me some reason to see how it could work this time.
 - Time period let's me imagine Ancestors living this

5. What are the top three pet peeves that you see in published books? (Note...though many answers overlap, we have provided raw data for informational purposes. If items were very close in wording, we indicated how many times an item was indicated, e.g. x3 (three times))

- **WRITING CHOICES/STYLE**

- gratuitous cursing
- poor grammar; not in the conversation; but otherwise
- too much technical description. Takes away from the pacing
- clichés
- confusingly structured sentences (x2)
- writing that doesn't relate to how a person talks - a lack of contractions for instance, it stops the reader for a second
- Bad/over-the-top writing
- purple prose
- too much description, in not so eloquent words (x2)
- Long-winded tangents
- Poor or lazy craftsmanship
- Overuse of common terms that go with the genre, especially "sardonic smile". The use of non-specific adverbs if not needed.
- language
- story doesn't flow
- Rambling (x2)
- Head hopping, that's just plain lazy writing.
- grammatical errors (x2)
- Flat stories - people who shouldn't have been published yet.
- Repetition, repetition, repetition. I know how she feels about such-and-such the first six times the author told me. repetition of uncommonly used words-they start to stand out (x4)
- Too much time dwelling on the problem--I call this monkey mind.
- Digressing from the story line
- Unclear POV switches
- having to reread a section to see whose vp I'm in
- Present tense
- Too much description about clothes, furnishings...I just skip ahead and decide not to buy that author again.

- **CHARACTER**

- Characters who do dumb things and live through it
- too many characters to keep track of
- Too many characters, names, details, to remember. Characters with similar names. For me it is better if they all start with a different letter of the alphabet. Readers are getting older and need all the help they can get! If this must be included, several subtle reminders help.
- Boring characters (x2)
- evasiveness of characters-I want to know them
- Stupid or unlikeable hero or heroine
- Cliche characters that aren't deliberate caricatures (x2)

- Stereotypical characters
- Over use of the generic hero/ine types.
- Contemporary acting heroins in a historical
- historicals with modern viewpoints and actions
- Over-the-top characters, unbelievable
- Undeveloped characters
- A character that is just too stupid to live
- Characters who always react instead of taking proactive action.
- "Feisty" heroines, who are actually spoiled brats
- "Strong" heroes, who are actually assholes
- Different Characters with names that are similar
- Stupid actions. I do not like a heroine without any common sense or stories that are just too fantastic to believe. And premises that are too far-fetched.
- Middle sag
- unsympathetic an/or not fascinating lead characters
- **STORY/PLOT**
 - lack of new ideas
 - too much angst - not enough good things to keep you on board
 - too complicated
 - boring storylines!
 - stupid or impossible situation
 - Stupid plots
 - Side tracks in plot
 - PREDICTABLE, PREDICTABLE, PREDICTABLE (x2)
 - Predictable endings
 - Boring
 - Confusing, hard to follow
 - Cliché stories
 - Can't anyone write romantic psychological thrillers? i.e., Fatal Attraction, Sing Misty for Me
 - Too much everything - over-the-top characters, world, descriptions
 - Being a horror fan from early on, I'd like to see some true horror in our mamby-pamby paranormal romances.
 - Teasing the reader. Don't withhold information that the reader needs to know just to keep him/her reading.
 - When hospitalsettings are used as places of romance.
 - the same storyline just with different names
 - Lack of realistic conflict
 - the only thing keeping hero and heroine apart is a lack of communication
 - Stupid actions. I do not like a heroine without any common sense or stories that are just too fantastic to believe. And premises that are too far-fetched.
- **RESEARCH**
 - when they dont know the area they are writing about or don't get the facts right (one book set in Albuquerque; called Lomas, Loman)
 - Historical inaccuracies
 - Getting the titles/inheritance rules wrong in a historical

- factual errors
 - SEXUALITY
 - not know it is erotic before I buy it
 - Too many sex scenes; distracts from the story
 - I don't enjoy reading novels that are full of sex
 - Too much unnecessary sexual content
 - boring sex scenes
 - PRINTING/EDITING/MARKETING
 - print is way too small (x3)
 - typos (x3)
 - Poor editing/proofing (x5)
 - Poor editing detracts from a good story (inconsistencies, mismatched time frames, etc.).
 - too much paranormal
 - too much YA
 - Poor or complicated pictures in a How to book
 - I believe the ratio—romance to thriller/suspense/paranormal/whatever...is set too high.
 - PRICE/COVERS
 - some books are way overpriced
 - tacky covers
 - Blurb on the back has nothing to do with the actual story
 - no real synopsis on the front inside cover or back
 - Cover art doesn't match the characters (ie: Picture shows a brunette heroine, but the story has her blonde)
 - Tell me a little of what the book is about
 - OTHER
 - Books are all the same - only the names and places change
 - Too Too many pages {time is precious }
 - I want them to make me think
 - I want to care
6. What's hot and what's not? In other words, what would you as a reader like to see more of, and what are you tired of seeing on the bookshelves?
- HOT/WANT TO SEE MORE
 - MYSTERIES/THRILLERS/ROMANTIC SUSPENSE
 - I love police stories and a really good love story.
 - I just love good mysteries with a bit of romance thrown into the mix.
 - I love mysteries with romance mixed in. Personal experiences told in a way that I would like to experience myself. Cliff hangers. Forensics
 - I absolutely love a good mystery I'm past the stage of romance novels
 - I really enjoy crime mysteries, but there are a lot of them out there. I am neither tired of them nor am I looking for more. I also enjoy stories about plain everyday people and their lives.
 - always a good suspense, murder mystery.
 - I would like to see more mystery/suspense

- I like suspense, intrigue, mystery, fast pace, characters I can relate to, a plot that makes sense,
- CONTEMPORARY
 - cowboys in contemporary settings I love.
 - Contemporaries that don't fall into the Sex and the City theme.
 - Want more contemporary romance
 - would like to see more contemporary romance
- PARANORMAL
 - Shapeshifters: wolves, dragons, etc. I still like vampires and space travel as long as the romantic element is strong in all of them.
 - Light mystic is fine if done well.
 - Paranormal is hot right now so why don't we explore other characters within that realm (witches, ghosts etc.)
 - I'd love to see more time travels. (Maybe even mine???)
 - I want to see more demon romances, more historicals taking place during ancient times
 - There can never be enough mythical worlds.
 - I know they've been around for a while but I still enjoy vampires and shape shifters. I like the directions some new series are going: Gena's Lords of the underworld and Allison Brennan's Original Sin. I'd love to see more series like Diana Gabaldon's Outlander, where the characters are so complex and well drawn that it's hard to believe you couldn't knock on their door and talk with them.
 - More Steampunk and SciFi
- HISTORICAL
 - I would like to see a more varied choice of books. Historicals with many different time eras and not just regency.
 - However, I'm still a fan of historical fiction.
 - Would like to see more historical fiction. (x2)
- HUMOR
 - I like: humor
 - The world is a tough place right now. We all get more than enough reality. When I read I like well written, entertaining, funny stories with interesting characters.
 - Cutesy
 - I like funny books for smart women. Don't insult my intelligence. I don't like stupid dingbats.
- CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT
 - edgy romance with deeper characters
 - I know that Agents push the unrealistic hero/heroine, but I am sick of reading about those people. I would love to see a Navy SEAL cry, a hero/heroine over 40, someone try to throw a 300# bad guy over their shoulder and fail, more characters who don't look perfect. I need to read unpredictable stories.
 - I would like novels that have some substance to them. Many today are almost predictable.

- As long as I care about the h/h and you build a credible world around them you can write about anything. That said, Navy Seals are getting to be common place so if you're writing along those lines it had better be pretty spectacular.
 - Women protecting themselves
 - The novels that bring characters into my life, characters that I never forget. I may lose much of the story detail over time but the characters remain alive in my memory. Examples are Diana Gabaldon, Sara Donati, Lisa Hendrix, Susan Wiggs.
 - SEXY
 - I like hot romance verging on erotica, sexy lovers who like curves
 - OTHER
 - More heartwarming stories with a kick of humor and liveliness.
 - I like contemporary suspense thrillers and family/relationship dramas. Real world stuff.
 - I want to see more first person narrative.
 - I like to learn something, even from fiction (like Michener)
 - I like more humor, different settings, different time periods. I think we'll have more choices with the vast amount of self-publishing going on. Not to say the books will be any good, but I bet we find a few pearls.
 - I love Anna Campbell's writing but also Stephanie Lauren and Julia Quinn. Jennifer Ashley's MacKenzie books are also good.
 - NO PREFERENCE
 - There's such a diverse arena of genres/stories, I don't think there's one genre that I'm tired of.
 - anything can be hot
 - Don't have any preferences; I enjoy reading many different types and genres.
 - I could love anything--no matter how "overdone"--as long as the writing and story feels fresh. In fact, I most enjoy the tried and true done in a whole new way.
 - I'm satisfied with the selection out there, but am always willing to read a new one (unknown author, that is)
- NOT HOT or TIRED OF
 - PARANORMAL
 - Tired of seeing books about the Underworld. They're everywhere.
 - I'm tired of seeing the current lot of paranormals. All the covers look the same. All the storylines are becoming the same. After you've read one or two shape shifter books, it feels like you've read them all. Fewer vampires.
 - Vampires (x6)
 - I'm totally sick of vampires and werewolves
 - Tired of vampires and such.
 - Please STOP with the vampires! The conflict is no longer the hero is a vampire and the heroine is a human. If you're going to do vampires for the

love of God please find something new. Anywhere. Maybe under a rock. Paranormal is hot right now so why don't we explore other characters within that realm (witches, ghosts etc.)?

- Everyone seems to like werewolves and vampires these days. I'm not a fan.
- I don't read paranormal, the beastie kind, at all. Not much for fantasy, either. I know they're popular but enough is enough.
- I'm up to here with sympathetic vamps, cuddly weres, and "do-gooder" shape-shifters... It's not scary...and it's just wrong!

○ OTHER

- The unrealistic love stories should be gotten rid of and creepy and sadistic books.
- I get tired of sheiks and ultra alpha males
- I'm a fantasy fan, and most fantasy is poorly written, or the authors die off before finishing their series.
- Would not like trash books.
- I am tired of seeing DIET BOOKS!
- I just don't read books I don't like so the fact that I'd rather not see paranormals isn't relevant.
- Tired of seeing? Don't pay much attention ... just don't buy what doesn't interest me.
- chick lit
- As long as I care about the h/h and you build a credible world around them you can write about anything. That said, Navy Seals are getting to be common place so if you're writing along those lines it had better be pretty spectacular.
- Stop the violence against women & children
- Tired of repeat cookbooks
- Books that glorify gore!!!!!!
- I am very tired of phony, made-up "obstacles to romance" that are invented just to make the plot move and have nothing to do with reality.
- I'm tired of seeing too many sex scenes in historical books. If they're going to do it, I'd like there to be some thought about the consequences; it's only recently that sex became divorced from babies.