Don’t Leave Me Hanging – Knockout Happy Endings with Traci Bell

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*It’s happened to all of us…you’ve invested time reading a book and the last chapter has you rolling your eyes.*

*Today, we’re happy to welcome paranormal romance author Traci Bell to the RU campus! Traci’s going to talk about writing a final chapter that will leave the reader with a lasting impression…in a good way.*[*www.tracibell.net*](http://www.tracibell.net/)

I recently finished reading a contemporary romance novel by a bestselling author who makes millions each year. The beginning of the book rocked. I was intrigued, engaged, and happily putting off my to-do list to keep reading. The end of the book left me hanging. When I put the book down for the last time, I was distinctly unsatisfied.

I felt cheated. For me, there was no real closure between the heroine and the antagonist. The antagonist altered the heroine’s life forever when she was young. I wanted the heroine to have an opportunity to look the antagonist in the eye and say ‘Screw you’ or ‘I won’ or ‘You can’t hurt me anymore.’ Cheated of this scene, the ending was not emotionally satisfying for me.

I’m picky about endings. Maybe that’s why I find them so hard to write.

Last month I finished the first draft of my current WIP. I rocked through most of the book, but the ending gave me fits. I wanted to provide a twist for the reader. (Check). The theme of the book is redemption, and I wanted the three main characters to find redemption, each for different reasons, and all through different means. (Che…  Uh…  Crap.)

It took me a month to write the end to my story. With as much hair as I pulled out while writing it, I’m surprised I have any left.

My WIP is about a ghost looking for redemption, and his efforts bring together and complicate the lives of the hero and heroine. I wanted the heroine to be redeemed through faith and purpose; the hero to be redeemed through love; and the ghost to be redeemed by his actions. Putting all three paths to redemption into one showdown scene with the antagonist was a challenge.

James Scott Bell said in his book *Plot and Structure* that “An ending can ruin an otherwise good book.  A strong ending can redeem an otherwise mediocre book.”

No pressure.

Since I write romances, you’d think the endings would be easy. The hero and heroine always end up living happily ever after.

William Goldman, an award winning novelist, playwright, and Academy Award-winning screenwriter, says that the key to all story endings is to give the audience what it wants, but not the way it expects.

For me, this is key to writing good romance. Readers want the happily ever after.  So give it to them in a surprising or emotionally satisfying way.

Adding a twist at the end of a novel can be a great way to surprise the reader. If you think back to the books or movies you’ve read that had great endings, I’ll bet many of them had a great twist – think *The Sixth Sense* or when Darth Vader tells Luke that he is Luke’s father in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Now these movies definitely didn’t have happy endings – Willis’s character is dead and Han Solo is still frozen when the credits roll. But these endings worked because a crucial piece of information was kept from the audience until the end. How can you do that and still end your story with the hero and heroine riding off into the sunset together?

Romance novels take readers through the range of emotions. So don’t sell the reader short on the ending. Tie up the loose ends (i.e. give your heroine the final showdown with the bad guy). Don’t make it too easy. Allow your characters to show great sacrifice or courage in their pursuit of love.

Some of my favorite happy endings don’t necessarily have a twist to them, but they are still emotionally satisfying. One example is the classic movie *Bringing Up Baby*. Throughout the movie, Katherine Hepburn’s character does everything possible to screw up Cary Grant’s life, intentionally and unintentionally. At the end of the movie she ruins his prized, one of a kind reconstructed dinosaur skeleton. But it’s okay. He loves and accepts her with all her faults. Who isn’t looking for someone to love them unconditionally?

I love endings that involve humor. I’ll share one with you from one of my favorite authors, Linda Howard. In her book, *To Die For,* Blair is being stalked and threatened. The hero and love interest is a cop named Wyatt. At one point in the story, Blair gets shot in the arm. She loudly and repeatedly demands a cookie from the paramedics, just like the cookies given by the Red Cross to donors. Wyatt thinks she’s being high maintenance and overly demanding. He doesn’t understand that the cookie represents comfort to Blair in a time of great stress.

At the end of the book, after Blair has faced down the person trying to kill her, she complains of a hurt toe to Wyatt.

“A hurt toe?” he said. “Good God. This calls for a cookie.”

I laugh every time I read that line. I always put the book down smiling. I love this ending because it shows how the relationship between Blair and Wyatt has grown, how he’s come to understand her. What woman doesn’t want to be understood like that by the man she loves? And the humor was right in line with the rest of the book.

1. What are some of your favorite endings? It can be any book or movie, any genre.
2. What did you like so much about that ending? What about it left you satisfied?