

ARE YOU WRITING WOMEN'S FICTION?

A Guide To Help You Determine
If Your WIP Qualifies as Women's Fiction

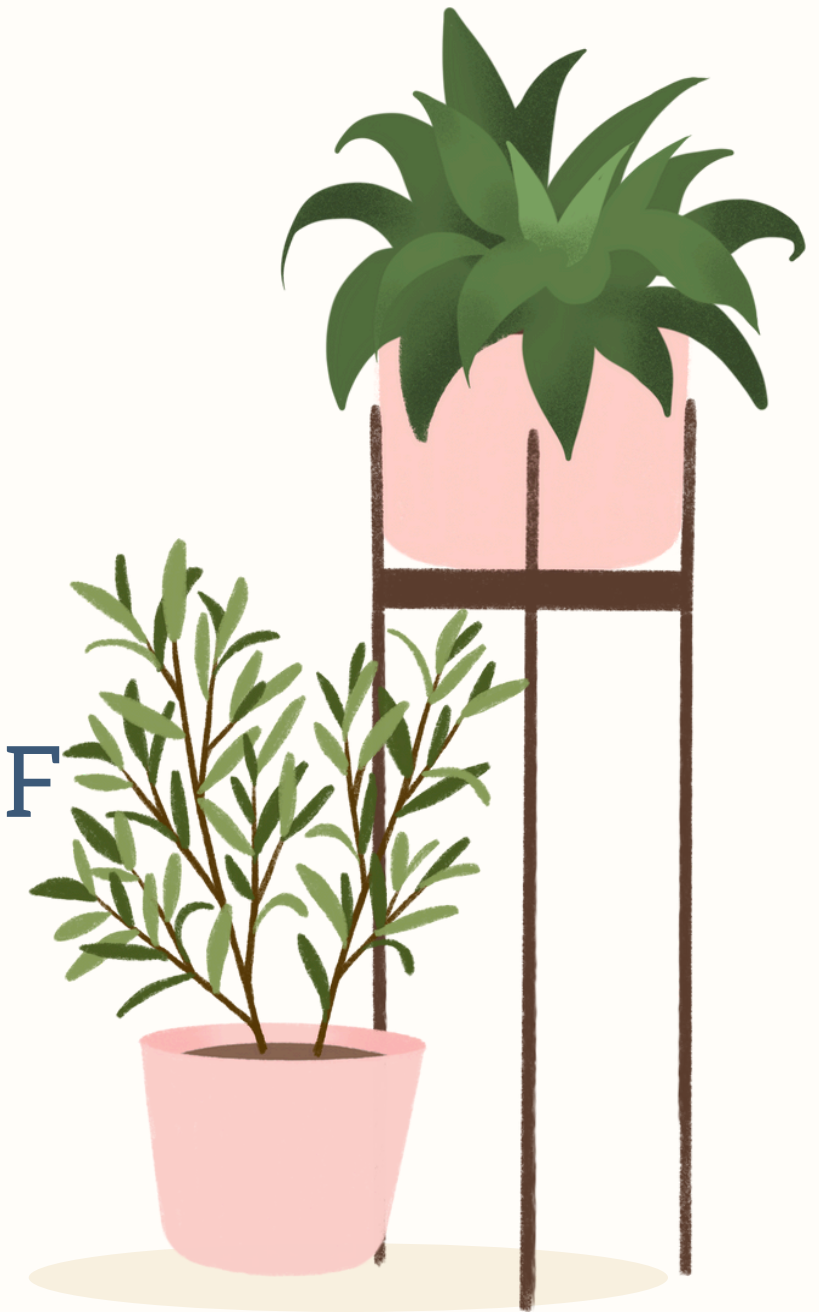
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Different Definitions of WF

Different resources define Women's Fiction in different ways. Some define it as *"fiction written by women, for women;"* or *"an umbrella term for books that are marketed to women;"* or *"books where the protagonist is struggling with 'feminine' flaws."*

None of these definitions really get at the heart of what WF is or how to differentiate it from other similar genres also mostly written by and for women (like Romance, for example).



Basic Genre Divisions

Genre is a label that tells the audience what to expect from a story. This labelling can be based on different aspects of a story:

- 1 TYPE OF PLOT (genre in the strict sense):**
Thriller, Mystery, Romance, Women's Fiction...
- 2 WRITING STYLE:**
Commercial, Upmarket, Literary
- 3 TARGET AUDIENCE:**
Middle Grade, Young Adult, New Adult, Adult
- 4 THE TYPE OF SETTING/ WORLD BUILDING**
Fantasy, Dystopian, Sci-Fi...
- 5 TIME FRAME**
Historical, Contemporary

Basic Genre Divisions

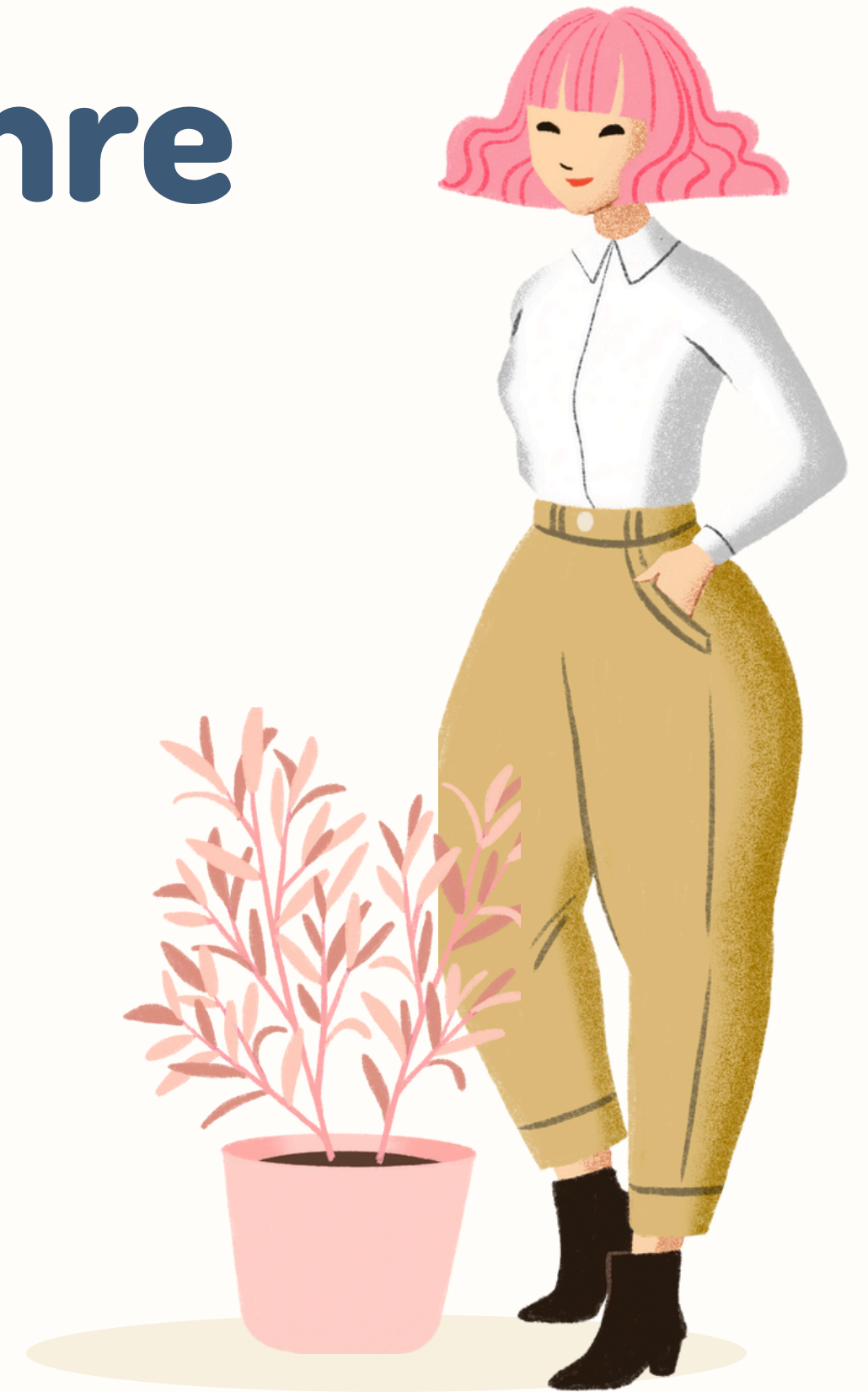
Genre division according to **the type of plot** (genre in strict sense) sets the readers' expectations as to what type of external (plot) events might happen in the story, and what kind of obligatory scenes or tropes it might contain. For instance:

- **THRILLER** – the protagonist deals with a detrimental threat through a series of adventures and intrigues.
- **MYSTERY** – the protagonist has to solve some sort of a crime (usually a murder).
- **ROMANCE** – the protagonists have to overcome different obstacles to be together.
- **WOMEN'S FICTION** – the protagonist has to overcome internal issues or change their worldview to live a full and happy life or realize their full potential.

We come to each of these genres **EXPECTING** a certain kind of plot development, and that the story will adhere to the expected genre conventions.

Women's Fiction as a Genre

Women's Fiction is defined as a story with a central theme of the protagonist's emotional journey.



You might be thinking... *Hey, but don't most books have an emotional journey somewhere in there... isn't that called the character arc?*

In many stories, there is a substantial character arc that supplements the plot, but in Women's Fiction, **the focus of the story IS the character arc**; the change of the protagonist's worldview IS what the story is all about.



Women's Fiction PLOT



Just like Thriller or Romance novels have a certain **formula to their plots** that the readers have come to expect of those genres, so does Women's Fiction.

In the novel's beginning, there is a misbelief or a character flaw that the protagonist has, and the external events of the novel (plot) force the protagonist to change their misbelief/correct their character flaw toward the end of the novel.

If the crux of your story—what your story is really about—is the emotional journey of the protagonist, how they change or evolve over the course of your novel, then

You're writing Women's Fiction even if...

- Your protagonist is male
- You are a male writer
- You have dual or multiple timelines
- You have multiple protagonists
- Your book is set in a historical/fantasy/sci-fi setting



**HOW WOMEN'S
FICTION
INTERSECTS WITH
OTHER GENRES**

Terms closely related to WF genre

In relation to the Women's Fiction Genre, we often hear terms such as BOOK CLUB FICTION, CHICK LIT or BEACH READS. How do these categories relate to Women's fiction?

Think of Book Club Fiction, Chick Lit, and Beach Reads as an attempt at **segmenting the audience**.

Book Club fiction is the sort of book you can imagine being discussed at a book club;
Beach Read is the kind of book a person would take with her to the beach;
Chick Lit is the type of lighthearted, quirky book a person would read for fun.

Terms closely related to WF genre

A work of Women's Fiction CAN be classified as either of these categories, but not EVERY Women's Fiction is necessarily classified as Book Club/Chick Lit/Beach Read.

Conversely, there are novels in other genres that could also be classified as Beach Read/ Book Club/ Chick Lit that AREN'T Women's Fiction.

For instance, *The Notebook* is (Upmarket) Romance that can be classified as Book Club Fiction, but at the heart of it isn't the protagonist's emotional journey but the romance between the main characters.

Women's Fiction and other genres

So far, we've been talking about genres in the strict sense of word (the type of plot that's at the story's heart).

But genres can be classified in a multitude of different ways:

WRITING STYLE:

Commercial, Upmarket, Literary

TARGET AUDIENCE:

Middle Grade, Young Adult, New Adult, Adult

THE TYPE OF SETTING/ WORLD BUILDING

Fantasy, Dystopian, Sci-fi...

TIME FRAME

Historical, Contemporary

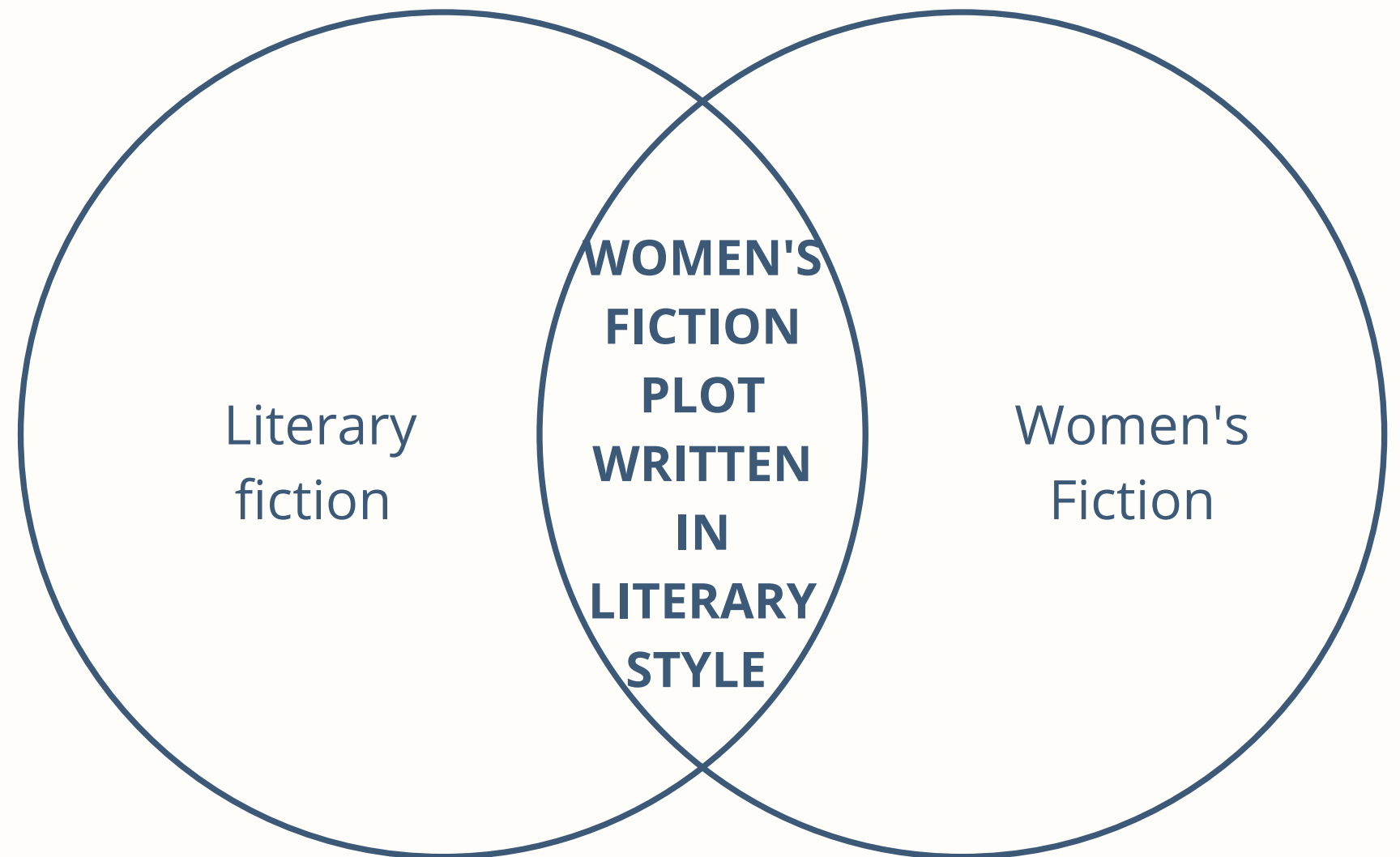


LITERARY WOMEN'S FICTION

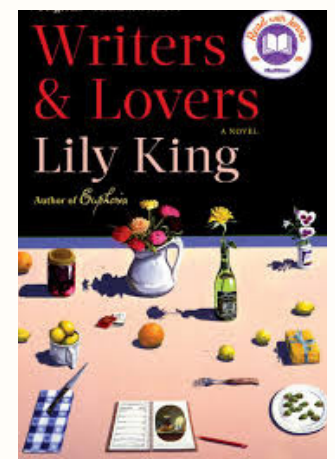
Since these genres are defined by different criteria (Literary Fiction by the style of writing and Women's Fiction by the type of plot at its heart, these two genres can intersect.

A work of Literary Fiction that focuses on the protagonist's emotional journey will often lose the prefix 'women's fiction.'

The same rule applies for UPMARKET fiction.



**EXAMPLES—
LITERARY WF:**

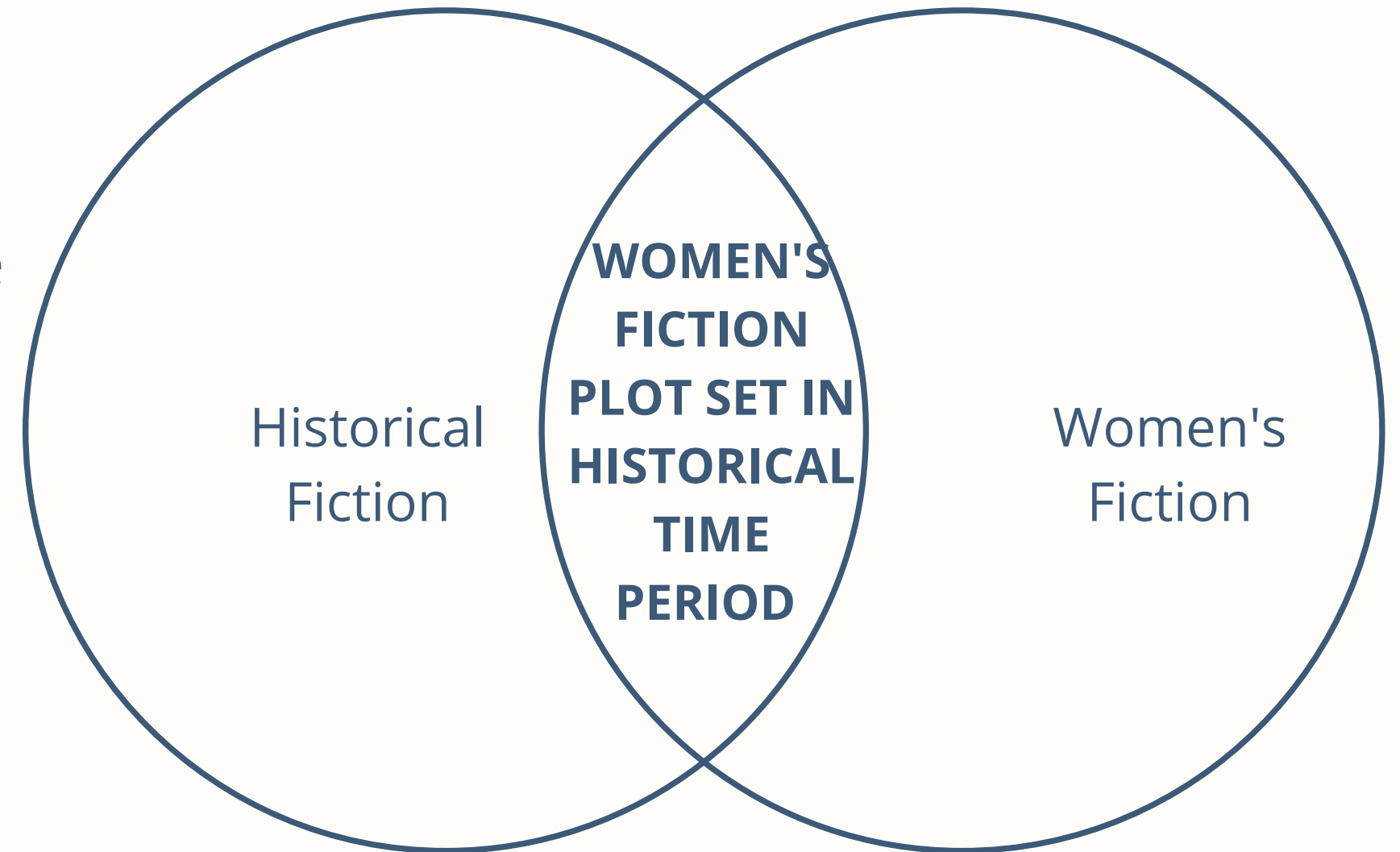


HISTORICAL WOMEN'S FICTION

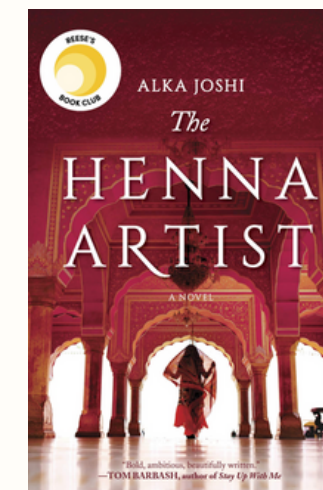
Since these genres are defined by different criteria (Historical Fiction by the time period the plot is set in, and Women's Fiction by the type of plot at its heart), these two genres can intersect.

Not every Historical novel is a WF, but every WF novel set in a historical period is Historical Fiction.

A work of Historical Fiction that focuses on the protagonist's emotional journey will often lose the prefix 'women's fiction.'



EXAMPLES— HISTORICAL WF:



TARGET AUDIENCE:

While Women's Fiction can intersect with Literary/Upmarket style of writing, or be set in a historical setting, when it comes to division according to target audience, there can be no intersections.

Target audience of Women's Fiction is ALWAYS the ADULT audience.

If your book follows a young adult individual and is targeted toward a young adult readership, then your book will be classified as YA, even if it features a typical women's fiction plot (meaning, if the story is about your protagonist's emotional journey).

But if your book follows a protagonist's emotional journey from a young age to an adult age, but it is aimed at an adult readership, then your book can be classified as Women's Fiction.



WOMEN'S
FICTION



YOUNG
ADULT

What if your story has elements of WF but also of other genres, such as Romance, Suspense, Thriller, Sci-Fi...

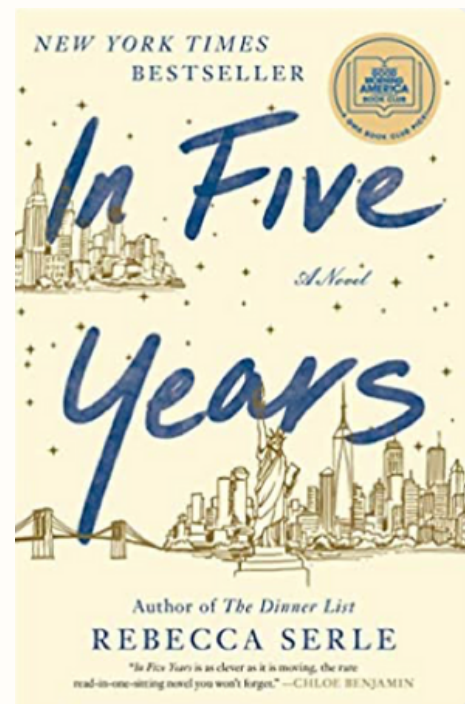
It's not uncommon for a book to have elements of multiple genres.

Women's Fiction can have elements of Suspense, Thriller, or Romance genres. It is also conceivable to put a women's fiction plot (emotional journey) in a Sci-Fi or Fantasy setting, or to sprinkle Magical Realism in it.

The key to differentiating these genres is determining which genre is the most PROMINENT one.

In other words, which genre is the genre that keeps moving the story forward?

In cases such as these, it is important to determine if it just so happens that **the emotional journey is set in a Fantasy setting**, or is Fantasy the crucial, essential element of the story—the focus of the story itself?



In Rebecca Serle's *In Five Years*, the protagonist wakes up five years into their future. Though this fantastical element serves as an inciting incident, the book doesn't focus on it, it focuses on the love story and the protagonist's emotional journey, hence it's labelled as Romance and Women's Fiction on Amazon, and not as Fantasy.



Weyward by Emilia Hart, which is set in a historic environment, and has fantastical elements that sometimes propel the story, the characters' emotional journey is still at a heart of the plot, so it is labelled as Women's Fantasy Fiction on Amazon.

In case of such genre overlaps it is important to ask yourself...

What is your readership base? Is the Women's Fiction readership accepting the fantasy element, or is the Fantasy readership accepting the Women's Fiction plot?

For example: in the movie *Avatar*, the protagonist undergoes a significant emotional journey, but the focus of the movie is the Sci-Fi worldbuilding, not the emotional journey of the protagonist. It is the worldbuilding that draws the audience in, not the emotional journey of the protagonist, even though it's substantial, and quite central to the story.

Is your book a Women's Fiction with Romantic Elements... Or Romance?

Many Romance protagonists have a substantial emotional arc (after all, many of them have to overcome their own outdated worldview or character flaw to get together with their love interest). Conversely, many WF books have a strong romantic thread.

How can you tell if you're writing WF with romantic elements or a straight-up Romance?

WF with Romantic Elements:

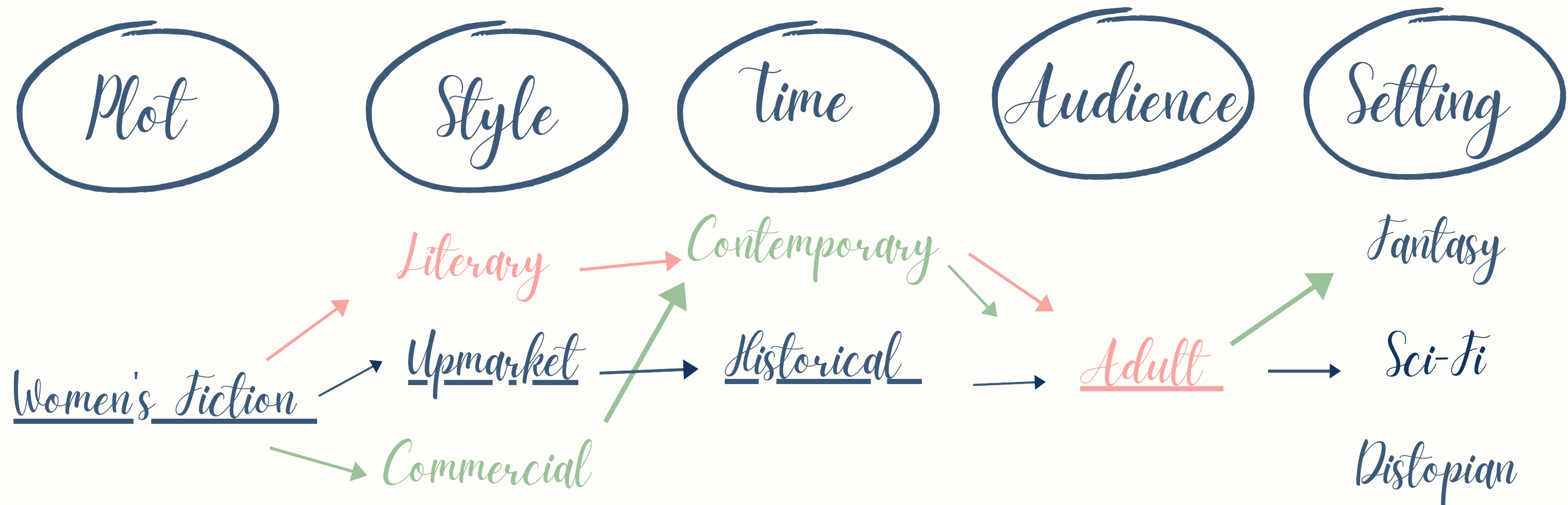
- ✓ Focus is on the protagonist's emotional journey;
- ✓ The love story only serves to kick off the emotional change (the MC changes, and that affects the romantic relationship in some way);
- ✓ Doesn't necessarily follow romantic tropes or formulas, *HEA* or *HFN* isn't guaranteed;
- ✓ Main story events (inciting incident, climax, resolution) are tied to the outdated worldview, not to the love interest;
- ✓ Main story question is: "*Will this woman overcome some sort of an internal obstacle (insecurity, distrust, people pleasing) or not?*"

Romance:

- ✓ Focus is on the romantic relationship;
- ✓ The emotional journey is in service to the love story, not the other way around (the MC must change to be with the love interest);
- ✓ Follows specific genre tropes and formulas (friends to lovers, enemies to lovers...);
- ✓ Ends with a *Happily Ever After* or at the very least, with *Happy For Now*;
- ✓ Main story events (inciting incident, climax, resolution) are tied to the love interest; inciting incident happens when they meet, resolution when they overcome obstacles to be together;
- ✓ Main story question is: "*Will this couple get together or not?*"

Combining Genres:

When a book is labeled as more than one genre (in a broad sense of the word), the rule of thumb is to leave out the labels that are implied.



- **Contemporary Adult Literary WF = Literary Fiction**
- **Upmarket Historical WF with a minor Sci-Fi element = Historical Fiction**
- **Commercial Contemporary WF with a minor fantastical element = Women's Fiction**

Conclusion:

You are writing Women's Fiction if your plot revolves around your character's emotional journey, whether or not your book is set in a historical, or fantastical setting, has romantic or thriller elements or is written in literary style.

If your novel contains elements of more than one genre, you first have to determine the genre in the strict sense of the word (according to the plot). You then have to discern which genre is most prevalent in your novel, to know how to best label it.

There is also some leeway in how you can label your book (for example, you might highlight a magical realism element to Magical Realism audience, and WF element to WF audience), **so long as you are realistic and truthful to what your book really is.**



**Thank you for
reading!**

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