

Romance Pays

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEX MCGILL

A Paraparaumu romance novelist tells SARAH LANG how she makes \$300,000 a year.

In New Zealand, it's very rare to make a living solely from writing books, even if you're published internationally. Yet romance novelist Leeanna Morgan is set to make \$300,000 this year. "Initially I would have been happy to sell one book," she tells me over tea and ginger loaf at her home in Paraparaumu. "Then I saw the numbers."

In this billion-dollar industry, the proceeds from her romance novels flow back to her without a publisher taking a cut. Despite finding a New York agent and a traditional publisher, Morgan decided against signing away the rights to her books for a pittance. Instead she decided to self-publish e-books, which each cost between US\$2.99 and \$3.99 (about NZ\$4–5.50). She sells as many as 300 a day, and her titles have appeared on the USA TODAY Bestselling Books list. Some novels are also available as paperbacks, printed on demand through Createspace, but that's not a big slice of the pie.

What helps the maths is that they're fairly quick to write. Morgan's 17th book *Just Breathe*, at 70,000 words, took just seven weeks, and she usually releases one every three months. To hook readers, her characters and narratives interlink across books and series. There's the eight-book Montana Brides series (fairly self-explanatory); the four-book Bridesmaids Club (about friends who give bridesmaids' dresses to women who can't afford them); and the three-book Emerald Lake Billionaires series (about men rich in everything except love). The last two books in her four-title series The Protectors (about men whose jobs involve protecting others) come out in April and August.

So why set every book in the unprepossessing city of Bozeman, Montana? The romantic lure of cattle

ranchers and cowboys? Actually, the first three books Morgan wrote were initially set in New Zealand and Australia; later she changed their setting to Bozeman after the heroine of the fourth book she wrote (but the first she published) travelled to Montana. They became the first four books in the Montana Brides series. By this point Morgan knew the US was her primary market – and that Bozeman, a sprawling city with several major industries, had storyline potential.

Built around community and family, her romances hit the highs and lows that readers expect – including, of course, the happily-ever-afters. Morgan tries to avoid being too formulaic. "You know when you get to an author's third book, and it's different characters, same story? I've always made a concerted effort to bring something different to the table each time." For instance, her latest series The Protectors has some thriller elements. I check out the series' second book *Just Breathe*, about a bodyguard called Tanner who falls for an antiques dealer called Kelly. It's well written, with believable dialogue, a little humour and evocative detail. Her novel *All of Me* won the 2016 Koru Award for best New Zealand romance novel in the long category.

From around 35 romance sub-genres, erotica (with its strong sexual content) is the most popular, but Morgan's novels certainly aren't erotica. Morgan is very careful about how she's portrayed, and perhaps these concerns are understandable, given that the serious literary fraternity often look down on or even laugh at romance novels, and don't consider them proper literature. But perhaps money speaks louder than words. "Romance writing is a billion-dollar industry,"



Morgan says. "A lot of people are reading and enjoying the books." She adds that romance novels can be misunderstood. "There's some romance in most literature, and romance is part of everyday life."

Whether or not romance novels are your thing, her entrepreneurial skills are admirable. Morgan, who has a business-studies degree, researched marketing and branding strategies before self-publishing. The first book in each series is free, to attract readers to her books. "BookBub, which emails people daily lists of free or discounted books, advertised *Sealed with a Kiss* for free recently, and I had over 60,000 downloads in 24 hours. On sales have been huge."

Her fifth series about four artist friends is all planned out, with a designer already working on covers. "I work a series ahead of myself as pre-orders help build momentum." For instance, she uses Smashwords: an e-book-distribution platform for independent authors which enables early pre-orders. Her website leeannamorgan.com links to sites that sell her e-books, and she's very active on social media.

So how did her romance with romance begin? Morgan, always a big reader, became a librarian. While doing a business studies degree extramurally, she read Mills & Boon novels to get her textbooks out of her head. "When I turned 30 I decided I wanted to write a book but that goal changed when we had children. When I turned 40 I thought 'I don't want the next 10 years to go by without writing a book.'" It was always going to be a romance, because it was a big market and she likes happy endings.

To make it happen, Morgan wrote a five-year plan, broken into one-year plans. She got up at 5.30am and wrote in the early mornings and evenings, to fit writing around her day job as the Kapiti Coast District Council's libraries-and-arts manager. "My husband has been awesome. I couldn't have done it

otherwise. While I was writing as well as working fulltime, he did most of the childcare and the housework." Now her writing has paid for luxuries like a trip to the States and a new car.

In September, she quit her job to write full time. Days later, she and her mum (who edits her books) flew to Bozeman to see if her depiction rang true. "It's far more spread out than I realised." Her husband and two teenage children joined her in Las Vegas. "In *Forever Dreams*, Gracie got married by Elvis in a drive-through. I really wanted to renew our vows with Elvis." So they did. "It was actually lovely as well as quirky."

Because she's an extrovert, Morgan's friends and family initially wondered how she'd cope working from home alone. But her exchanges with work contacts and fans prevent cabin fever. She emails newsletters every six to eight weeks, and fans post on her Facebook page and send emails (mainly thank yous). Recently, she sent a signed paperback copy to a Puerto Rican reader for her birthday, at the sister's request. And not every fan is female; Morgan knows of at least four male fans, one of whom stumbled on a book on his wife's e-reader.

Morgan says she'd never have got started without the help of friend Diana Fraser, who was already self-publishing romance novels as e-books. The pair now runs e-publishing courses through Kapiti libraries, teaching everything from formatting to promotion. Morgan is also an active member of Romance Writers of New Zealand, and did a self-publishing presentation at last year's conference.

Morgan thinks there's never been a better time to be a writer. "Sometimes we get so constrained by the size of our country and what we think we can and can't do, when internationally there's such a huge market for writers. E-books make things easier. But you still have to have a really good book." ■