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Her journey to publishing success proved to be as rocky as the romances she writes.

It took a decade during which time she moved to America with husband Norm, a computer analyst, and Sandon; moved back to Melbourne; moved to Geelong; and had her second child, Barton, now seven.

She wrote three books, took a three-year writing break, joined writers' groups, and suffered demoralising rejections while balancing her family and day job.

**'Oh, God, what was happening to her? She was pregnant by another man, in a town that didn't trust her as a doctor, and attracted to her boss who didn't think she was physically able to handle the job. What would the psychologists make of that?'
— from Pregnant on Arrival**

In 2002 she attended a romance writing workshop in Queenscliff where she told best-selling Ballarat romance writer Marion Lennox that her two rejection letters had been a page long each and offered a constructive review of her work. Marion told her the detail of the replies was uncommon and not to give-up.

"It is the hardest thing I have ever done because when you write and you put stuff out there a part of you goes out there with it and it gets rejected," Fiona says.

"And that can be very hard and that's why it's very important that you join a writers'

group because you do need support.

"You need people to pick you up and dust you off and to say you really can write. This just wasn't the story."

In 2003 she sent off her third book, titled *Midwives Mission*, and thought she'd nailed it. Mills & Boon wrote back asking for revisions but in the end it wasn't enough to get it published.

Fiona describes it as her first "no-tears rejection" as she was invited to submit another work.

"You really have to couch your rejections [and that was] a positive rejection," Fiona says.

"So that was the first time there weren't tears that was the first time I said, 'OK, that book didn't work for them but they like how I write.'"

It was like letting a pit bull lick a dog biscuit as Fiona decided no how many books it took she would be published.

She kissed her fourth manuscript titled *Outback Baby* goodbye and sent it to Mills & Boon in December last year.

Six months later she got a call from an

editor followed by two-and-half pages of suggested revisions.

Fiona rewrote her book in four weeks and on September 5 finally sold it, renamed *Pregnant on Arrival*.

It may be the most mocked of writing genres but Fiona says romance is easier to read than write.

She believes the genre is viewed as the literary equivalent of fast food because it is overwhelmingly written by women for women.

"I think it goes right back to women being perceived as second-class citizens," Fiona says.

"But romantic fiction is well-written, it plays a real role.

"I reckon it's cheap therapy ... you know what you are going to get and we don't always want to have that heavy-duty significant read."

Fiona has a master's degree in advanced nursing and is an avid reader of literature, fiction and non-fiction as well as romance.

She describes herself as prosaic rather than romantic and says she found writing romance more difficult than her university studies.

But she admits the stories often share a common theme – a hero and heroine who are attracted to each other but have to overcome a hurdle to be together.

"I normally start off trying to work out



After a decade of manuscripts and rejection slips, Fiona Lowe has scored her first Mills & Boon book deal ... "It is the hardest thing I have ever done because when you write and you put stuff out there, a part of you goes out there with it."

Photograph: Phillip Stubbs

what conflict each of them could have that would keep them apart," Fiona says.

"Obviously the one thing that you are guaranteed in a romance is a happy ending but how they get there is what makes the story."

Romance Writers of Australia's published author liaison, historical romance writer and former Belmont High School student Anne Gracie says it's a mistake to assume romance stories follow a set formula or that their authors share a profile.

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