
Janet Aylmer

Julia and the Master of Morancourt
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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS for Julia and the Master of Morancourt

Q: What were your main choices before you began to write your novel?

A: I like the Regency period, because this was an interesting time in history, stretching from the major upheavals in French society in the late 18th and early 19th centuries through the beginnings of the industrial revolution in Britain and the introduction of more modern farming methods to the first stirrings of independence for women.

I am sure that all keen readers of Regency romances know books where the handsome hero and a beautiful heroine meet in the early 1800s, fall in love and reach their destiny together unaffected by the realities of life. But I preferred to write a novel that included some of the events and aspects of life contemporary at that time, to give the story a more authentic setting.

Q: How did you develop the plot?

A: A good story has its share of both tragedy and happiness, bad times as well as good, and I decided that the negative effects of the War with Napol'ion should influence the story. So the heroine's brother is killed in Spain, and the hero fights in Wellington's army, before the novel begins.

Then there was the contrast between living in a relatively isolated big house in a rural area with only a few close friends, and the 'delights' that towns and cities such as Bath and London offered to visitors, including more opportunities to meet young people of the opposite sex. Even living in a rural area was not always as peaceful as one might imagine, as my heroine Julia soon discovered.

Q: What other ideas influenced the story?

A: It is easy to forget how difficult it was to get between places and around England at that time. The road surfaces were bad, the canals were used for goods and not for transporting people, there were no railways; and there was only a limited choice of coaching routes between the bigger towns. So visiting a friend or relative some distance away was a major undertaking, even if your family was wealthy enough to own a private carriage.

Another aspect was how easily young men of good families could get into debt, because of the popularity of betting and other forms of gambling, and the limited choices of employment for many well-born young men. There are good sources of information about the social life in the city of Bath, and I was also aware of the interesting local history in Dorset, and made use of that in different ways. Lastly, I have family connections with the places mentioned in the story, so I enjoyed using that knowledge.

Q: Have you included any genuine historical characters or locations in your story?

A: Yes. Although the main characters in the novel are all imaginary, Sir William Knighton was a real person, a physician to King George III, and Mr Thomas Andrews was a popular dancing master at that time.

The Vauxhall Gardens in London and the Sydney Pleasure Gardens in Bath were very popular places to visit in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The early balloonists and the clown Grimaldi were all real entertainers in their different ways.

Morancourt and its old Castle are imaginary, but the attractive market towns of Beaminster and Bridport, and the hill fort at Eggardon in Dorset can still be visited today.

Q: Do you think that it was difficult for a wellborn young lady in the Regency period to find a suitor?

A: A cynic would say that a really attractive girl, with or without money, has always found it easier to find someone to marry than someone with less to recommend her. The real difficulty seems to have been for a young lady to contrive to marry someone of her own choice, rather than a suitor decided for her by other people.

Some young men had the same problem. The more wealthy or "high born" a man might be, the greater his family's expectations were that he should marry an heiress, however ugly, to support the family estate, rather than the pretty but impecunious young woman who may have taken his fancy.

Q: Your heroine's problems in the novel seemed to arise partly from the early death of her brother. Do you consider chance to have been a significant factor in how a family might prosper?

A: Yes I do. Distant relatives could sometimes inherit an estate quite unexpectedly because of a death that nowadays could be avoided. The percentage of women (and babies) who died in childbirth was shocking, and anyone suffering a serious accident (or injury in war) had little chance of receiving expert medical attention. The situation was very haphazard, with some families suffering persistent bad luck, whilst others reared large numbers of children apparently without any difficulties.

This was also a period when the economy veered wildly between boom and bust, partly due to the War with Napol'ion and sometimes due to crop failures and bad weather. Banking was unsophisticated, and many local banks failed when times were hard. That could have a dramatic effect on the security of all but the most wealthy families - something that has become rather too familiar in recent times.

Q: Would you, the author, liked to have lived in the Regency era?

A: No, I would not, particularly as I am an independent-minded person. Even if I had been lucky enough to have been born into a reasonably wealthy family, as a female my choices would have been very limited by the conventions of the time.

Young women were usually dependent on their father or brother(s) for financial support. Their choice of a partner in life was often controlled by a parent or other family member, whose preferences might be social status or money, with love or affection much lesser considerations. Younger sons were expected to enter the church or to serve their country as an officer in the Army or Navy. Any occupation linked with "trade" was thought to be inappropriate.

Modern life has many disadvantages, but most young people have a great deal more choice of occupation and of their partner in life than their forebears had during the Regency period.

Q: What impression would you like your novel to leave with the reader?

A: First of all, a sense of enjoyment, and perhaps a little more knowledge than before about the Regency period and the people who lived at that time. Then, in these rather depressing times, I hope that reading 'Julia and the Master of Morancourt' makes readers feel more cheerful than before they began the novel. Finally, I plan to write two more books, about the younger sisters Sophie and Harriet, so I hope that readers will look forward to the chance to know more about the other members of the Maitland family.