

HOT AND BOTHERED PODCAST

What We Love About Regency with Julie Ann Long

VANESSA Several years ago, when we started Hot and Bothered, we put out a call for romance readers, and asked them to call in and leave us a voicemail, and tell us what they love about the genre, how many romance novels a year they read, why they read them. And we got a voicemail that stuck with me so much that I have since become friends with the woman who sent in the voicemail.

JESSICA Hi Vanessa and Ariana, Jessica Luthor here. I am thirty seven years old, and I live in Austin, Texas. I couldn't even begin to tell you how many romances I read in a year, I'm gonna estimate it's probably around fifty, because there are fifty-two weeks in the year. I'm a journalist, I work primarily on stories about gendered violence. It's very hard work a lot of the time, it can be very emotionally exhausting, and I love the fact that I can pick up a romance novel and know that no matter what, that it will have a happy ending, and that I will feel happy at the end. And I count on it. And it means that I can trust whatever is happening in the book, that I will feel good when it's over.

VANESSA When Jessica and I were on the phone recently, I asked her what romance novels she was reading at the moment. She gave me some recommendations, but then she told me "Wait, Vanessa, have I told you to read Julie Ann Long?" and I was like, "No, who's Julie Ann Long?" And she said, "Oh, you have to read *How the Marquess was Won* by Julie Ann Long. I love it so much that I've started reading it once a year. It restores my faith in humanity." That Zoom call was about six weeks ago, I picked up *How the Marquess was Won* immediately, and I am six Julie Ann Long books later. Hot and Bothered, as the gift that keeps on giving, means that I tweeted about how much I love Julie Ann Long, she wrote back, and I was able to get her on the phone.

[theme starts]

VANESSA What we have for you today is a brief conversation between me and Julie. We talk about what it's like to be a romance writer, why regency as a genre keeps lasting, and what makes certain heroes sexy. I'm Vanessa Zoltan, and this is Hot and Bothered -- [singsong voice] an interview!

[theme continues, then fades]

VANESSA Today we are lucky enough to be joined by Julie Ann Long, an amazing romance novelist who I am like, making quick work of her entire oeuvre. The first book of hers that was recommended to me was *How the Marquess was Won*, but I have to say Julie, that my favourite so far is *It Started with a Scandal*.

JULIE I love that one too.

VANESSA Do you have favourites of your own books?

JULIE It depends! I have different reactions to different books. With *It Started with a Scandal*, what stood out to me very strongly when I finished it was how much I missed spending time with -- like I felt like I was saying goodbye to friends. And every book has a different kind of feeling at the end of it. I felt wistful! I'm Like oh, I loved spending time with little Jack, and Lave (sp?), and Elise, and now I don't get to anymore. But I'm so happy you love it.

VANESSA Well, tell us a little bit about yourself. How did you get into writing romance novels?

JULIE See I always wanted to be a writer. I always - from the moment I could learn how to write, that seemed the whole point of learning how to write was to be a writer. But um life took you know a number of twists and turns, you know, I ended up in the corporate world, I worked in global finance at Levi-Strauss for a while, and I played in bands in San Francisco, so I played guitar, and sang, and wrote some songs and stuff for awhile, and that seemed to sort of satisfy that little bit urge, you know, the writing aspect, the men with the long hair, that kind of thing, drama, passion. And when the dot-com boom, the first one came around, I uh, had a web design company, I did graphic design, and then the word dried up. The bubble burst, and I was kinda broke, and most of my friends had moved away, and I- I needed to do something, and this is what I did. I took that opportunity to finish the book that I always wanted to write. I thought it would be fun to write something that I loved reading. So I started and I wrote *The Runaway Duke*. And I wrote it, and I got an agent, and I wrote it, and published it, and that was back in 2004.

VANESSA That's amazing, it's like, the dream. So you write books -- and again, I'm a new reader of your romance, so I'm not as acquainted as I should be. But you are a writer primarily of regency romance novels, correct?

JULIE Yes, yes.

VANESSA So, tell me about that decision. Why do you think it is that women in 2021 still love reading regency? What is it about that time period that allows us to escape differently than contemporary romance?

JULIE I think a lot of the blame, responsibility can be laid at Jane Austen's door, because her books were so unforgettable and so vivid and so captivating, we just wanna be in that world. So it captured our imaginations and then kept it for hundreds of years. It also-- I mean, historical romance gives you an opportunity to transcend the ordinary. Cause with a contemporary romance, the settings, and the people involved, and the circumstances, we can all more or less relate to. With a historical romance, we can only guess. What it does is it transcends and lifts us more out of our ordinary world than a dream or a fantasy would, with long gowns and fans and horses and carriages and you know dukes, and regency as a scrim

sort of, where we can sort of project our modern needs and desires, and I think it does provide that kind of a backdrop, you know, like a Zoom background! Like- You know, we can lay a story against that particular setting. We set it in Mayfair and we put them in dresses, and for the most part the context is historical, but because the point of these stories is for women to see themselves reflected, I think, and to feel appreciated, and to escape, that's what we want to do, we want to adapt that circumstances to whatever modern standards there are. Does that make sense?

VANESSA Yeah! I also think that it's like, catharsis through melodrama? Right like I'm not trapped the way a character in regency romance is trapped. Right like, she, this character is like, I'm gonna have to become a servant and live a life of servitude if I cannot find a husband, and she is trying to out-run a piece of gossip, right? Like she's like, 'as soon as this piece of gossip hits the suburbs, I'm screwed.' And like, that is obviously not something that I can relate to, but I can relate to the feeling of feeling trapped. Of feeling trapped in a bad relationship and feeling like -- I mean I remember this when I was 29, and I just feel so silly that I felt this way when I was 29 now that I'm 38, but like, I was 29 I was in an unhappy relationship, and I was like 'But this is my chance, it's too late now to try with someone else,' which obviously isn't true, but I feel like you can't say that and take yourself very seriously at 29 in the United States as a liberated woman, but you can read about yourself in these like much more trapped dynamics.

JULIE It's true and I think that a lot of studies have been done about fiction, and in general it helps us build empathy, because we do run that gamut of the story, and there's a safety in particular within romance, like you said it's a catharsis, but we also, it's a comfort zone where we can live out those tragedies and see the possibilities, and so it helps you imagine the possibilities of freedom or change, I think.

VANESSA Oh I love that, yeah

JULIE People ask, why would you be interested in romance when they're so similar? 'But aren't they all the same?' That's one of the questions we have to contend with, and the anecdote that I often volunteer is like: You're sitting on the bus, there are two people on the seat in front of you, and one of them turns to the other and says 'You know that guy I used to have a crush on in highschool? Well, he started working in my office.' Why is that interesting? It's because once you start caring about the characters, everything is interesting. Even the most mundane things about your friends are interesting, right? And so that's why, it's an empathy. We want to empathize. Romance creates empathy and once you know about those characters and like them, you're invested in their story, even if it's a familiar story. That's just what humans are, we want that connection. And it's more easy to escape into that world, to forget yourself for a little while I think, and I think that's probably the key to its continued appeal.

VANESSA Is there something in specific about that world that you enjoy writing? Like, do you love writing about the balls, or like, the social structures of the time and how difficult they were to break? Is there something about regency that you're like 'This is fun to play with.'

JULIE Oh I do, I love the social structures. Like, with *It Started with a Scandal* we have people from two very different stations in life, and I love the friction and the possibilities for conflict that presents, you know? It's kinda thrilling and sexy as these two people try to kinda work that out. That's kind of part of it. Just that entire, I just sort of love that part of history. I don't know who sold me on it more, Jane Austen or Amanda Quick, you know? I was always just very sort of entranced by it, the clothing, the carriages, the morays, the history, all of that is fun. But, I think you nailed it when you said the social structures.

VANESSA And so something that you pull off so brilliantly, is you often have two characters where, the man -- understandably given the time period -- has a lot more power than the woman, and sometimes not only is it just gender dynamics, but he is wealthier, he is her boss, he is the captain of the ship and she is a stowaway on it. And yet the relationships still read, even as a contemporary reader, as so consensual, it's not this like icky feeling of "well of course she's gonna sleep with him, he's her boss!" I'm wondering how you go about threading that needle. Are you like -- so she has to beg for it, because he has the power, like, what sort of rules do you have in order to navigate that?

JULIE I think that what you're describing as consent, it's a natural, organic outflow of regard that two people have for each other. So it's in a situation where it's for instance, Captain Flint, or Levée would not abuse their power, they might want something profoundly, but because their regard for that other person is so complete, you can't violate that without violating yourself. The power is equal with two people who care about each other. There are stations in life, but there are the fundamental, emotional foundations that these two people have built to this point in the story, and it's unthinkable, for them to violate that.

VANESSA Well it sounds like what you're saying is that you write the characters well enough that they build up enough trust. [Julie laughs] The dynamic is well written, therefore--

JULIE Well that's the hope! It has to be an outflow from that. Like I think I can imagine there are romances that take advantage of a dynamic that is less fluid or forgiving, or mutual, but um, that's not what I find sexy, really. And I think that mutual, truly fundamental knowing that two people have for each other is really sexy. That's what I try to do when I write, is build that into the story and the characters.

VANESSA So many romance novels in general are these series, right. So the books that I've been talking about so far are part of the Pennyroyal Green series. And so you have a couple of settings within these multiple books, like, there's a school for recalcitrant girls that many of the characters sort of weave in and out of, and there's the Pig and Thistle, the like, pub that many characters weave in and out of. And I'm wondering - because each of your books stand alone, so I'm wondering what you think it adds, to have multiple books centered around a certain number of fictional realities.

JULIE I think it adds [clears throat] texture to the characters in the stories? I always feel like when I'm writing like I'm a giant standing over a town, and peering down over it, you know?

so I can always like-- I can tell one part of the story, but I can see everything else that's going on. You know, like I can see the story happening at the Pig and Thistle, even if you know, we're focusing on somebody else. I think that, whether it's subliminal or overt, provides a bit of texture to the story, and it just pushes out the world that they're living in so that it makes it more real for the reader. At least that's the hope. And it's also fun for me! It's fun to imagine, all of these places and the things going on inside these places and life continuing even when I'm not telling a story set in a particular place in the series?

VANESSA Right

JULIE Or like when you're composing a piece of music, you know, there's that underlying foundation, a theme that runs through it. I feel like that's kind of part of it too.

VANESSA I've never read anything like Miss Marietta's Academy in any other romance novel I've ever read. A school for poorly behaved young women? That's fantastic! [Julie laughing] Why don't you tell people what it's about, in at least two of the novels of yours that I've read, it is a major setting for love!

JULIE It just, seemed like a fun place to -- you know? First you get a lot of women together-- and women of various ages. And so you have teachers, girls and women who are students, and um it's an opportunity to show growth and challenge, and it's a saucy environment too because it fascinates all the young men in the village you know, oh naughty girls go to that school, what they're doing up there? It just seemed like a lot of fun!

VANESSA It's also just fun, because it sounds like it's a really good school. Like it's actually a loving place with you know some structure to it, but it seems like one of the only ways a girl could get a proper education. So I was imagining like, I guess if I was twelve I would like try to behave badly to try to be sent to school.

JULIE [laughs]

VANESSA Cus otherwise I'm just like sitting around needlepointing.

JULIE But, some people may not have ambitions beyond that.

VANESSA No, one of the things I like about your characters is that they are self reliant, they are feminist in so many ways, and yet they are also basic in so many ways that I find wonderful, right? Like there's the coveting of bonnets, and the like really loving a certain pair of gloves, or like cherishing how beautiful a fan is. And I'm just like yeah, you can be a feminist and still like, want a bonnet! I just love it. [Julie laughs] As a fellow basic, I'm like, TRUE

JULIE Well it describes like, every woman I know, or every woman I really care about, you know? You wanna write about people you like and relate to and that's it. We're all-- we're many things.

VANESSA So Julie, remember, in pre-COVID times, you would sometimes go to a cocktail party, I'm Julie Ann Long I'm a super successful, and awesome romance novelist--

JULIE That's gonna be my new greeting

VANESSA Yes! What is the reaction of the person you're speaking to usually, and what's that conversation look like?

JULIE You know, truthfully, most people are intrigued that you write a book at all. [Vanessa laughing] You know, I remember a signing once where people would stroll by-- it was at a mall, and this guy'd stroll by, pick up a book, look at it, put it down, 'Oh I could do that', and stroll off.

[Vanessa gasps]

JULIE There's like six of us and you imagine we're all sorta-- we're all trying to like, restrain our middle fingers... It's that kind of thing. But I'm at the point where I'm like, if you're comfortable enough with who you are and what you're doing you can't really take offense.

VANESSA Right

JULIE You know you can educate, and um now I'm like, well read the book. I think that's an interesting thing. Why is that acceptable, to assume that all romances are the same?

VANESSA Right

JULIE And why is the reference point always Fabio, which goes back like what, forty, fifty years? In what other context or topic or subject is that acceptable? So, that's interesting to me. I don't know the origin of that.

VANESSA My friend Chloe, whenever anybody mocks romance novels, she goes "Oh which one did you not like?"

JULIE Yeah, oh good one! Yeah.

VANESSA And they're just like, "Oh I've never read one.: And she's like, "Oh, I don't feel comfortable saying I don't like something until I try it."

JULIE Yeah! I'm curious about the origin and the acceptability of that particular prejudice. You know cause they've been around forever. I've read romances that have been around, written in the 30's, that were delightful. It's a reflection of, women's concerns, you know, women's fantasies, how they've changed throughout history. You know I um wonder, if that's

part of it. If it's because women love it so much. And you know, people like to stratify. People like to rank. People like something to feel superior about. That's just the way human nature is.

VANESSA I feel superior to John Updike [Julie laughs] so. And I enjoy feeling superior to him.

JULIE It's all good. I was raised in a house where we had, you know, everything, and I mean everything. And I read the Bogadita (sp?), Rosemary Rogers, you know, everything and we didn't differentiate, you know and I think that's probably a good part about my upbringing. Here's some books, read them, You know? Enjoy.

VANESSA That's how Virginia Woolf was raised, too you know.

JULIE Well there you have it .

VANESSA It worked for you and for Virginia Woolf, so everyone else, try it. Just throw some books at your kids. You know. You'll be fine. [Julie laughing] It blows my mind that men don't read romance novels, you know, like straight men. The same way that it's like, always confusing to me why more straight men don't take dance classes and yoga classes, I'm like, that's where the women are! And I just feel like romance novels are like amazing instruction manuals for straight men, of like -- this is how we want to be treated.

JULIE Right

VANESSA There's this perennial question of like, What do women want? And I'm like "There are thousands of books that describe in like, precise detail what it is we want."

JULIE We dogear the pages and hand them over!

VANESSA Exactly! I'm like, "Here's a Pennyroyal Green book. This is what I want. I want you to not only be okay that I have a kid from a previous marriage, but I want you to fall in love with my child entirely when you find out there's something wrong with my kid, leave a party in the middle of the night to go out in the rain and find him, and then be very concerned about communicating to me quickly that you found the kid," right? Like it's not just the sex stuff.

JULIE It's love!

VANESSA Yes!

JULIE It's the language of love!

VANESSA Yes!

JULIE And the language of caring! It's these intimate moments that make the sex sexy! Because the sex is the expression of the caring of those people. That's the thing. The marketing of romance has been almost too successful in that it's always been pointed at women. And you know, you can say that it's becoming more porous, but the confines around gender roles and gender preferences, until those become a little more porous, fewer men will be inclined to reach for that automatically. But I do have male readers! One's a circuit court judge. One was a codebreaker in World War II. You know and they're not ashamed. They found out it was fun, they had a good time, they liked the history, they liked the people in it. But there would have to be some fundamental change in how the books are marketed in order for men -- most men -- to feel comfortable in picking them up. And that would be fun! Imagine that world!

VANESSA I will say that I think that romance is one of the genres that is like, most on the cutting edge, right? Like it is one of the most diverse places in the publishing world, it is a place that seems to be just like, always one step ahead of the rest of mass culture as far as its progressive, social politics.

JULIE You're probably right, and I think that's because it reflects what women primarily are thinking and caring about

VANESSA Yeah

JULIE Throughout the ages, it has done that. But it's fascinating to me-- the tropes are so different, because they reflect the women's concerns over time.

VANESSA Yeah like damsel in distress novels are like, much less popular now that we're not trapped in our houses in the suburbs.

JULIE Yeah, there's an author named Faith Baldwin that I love, that started writing in the 30s, and I was fascinated by, with her books, that there were women who had jobs, and one was a pilot and a big deal wasn't made out of it, this is just who they were. Choices were between two lovers and nowadays people can't stand that. Another one was exhausted executive, with the secretary who is overworked, you know, and I read like, four of them like that, like I'm gonna rescue this man- this strong man.

VANESSA Right. The other thing I just wanna say to our listeners before we say goodbye is just how funny your books are. Like I have not read any other book, in which the statue of the David has its penis shot off, and then hit someone in the head. Like that is not something that could happen outside the genre of romance.

JULIE [giggling]

VANESSA And it is, to other genres' loss, that that only happens in our genre..

JULIE Gotta have fun with it, right, and I remember writing that scene, and it was late at night, when you get really punchy you know, and it was just, you know, you gotta entertain yourself while you're writing it. But it was also you can't just have light without dark. It's what makes the other stuff stand out in relief, you know, if you do it properly.

VANESSA Right. So well done. Everybody go read Julie Ann Long, I suggest starting with the Pennyroyal Green series, but Julie, do you have a place you recommend that people start with your books? Anywhere? All the places?

JULIE It depends! What's interesting to me is everyone seems to have a different favourite in the series, and they all have different reasons for it, but I know that what I did for Duke, is a really popular starting place, is starting at the beginning, because there are interesting character threads and themes that run through the whole series, and characters change and grow, so I would recommend staring at the beginning of the series

VANESSA Mhm,

JULIE So *The Perils of Pleasure*, is a good place to start.

VANESSA Alright everybody, you have your assignment. Ariana is putting it on her reading list as we speak, I'm watching her do it. And everybody report back as to which is your favourite!

[theme starts]

VANESSA This has been an interview from Hot and Bothered. This episode of Hot and Bothered was produced by Ariana Nedelman, edited by Molly Baxter, her first episode editing, yay Molly! We want to thank Jessica Luthor for the voicemail she sent three years ago, and also for allowing me to become her friend and making me this recommendation. And of course, Julie Ann Long for taking the time to speak with us. Go read her Pennyroyal Green series! Keep paying attention in your feed because we will be dropping a few other interviews here before On Eyre starts. But definitely stay tuned for On Eyre, which is launching on July 2.

[theme fades out]