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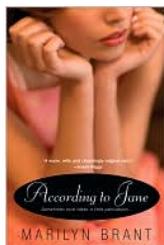
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Desperately Seeking Jane

by Jill_Dearman



JD: When did the idea for *According to Jane* first come to you, and how?

MB: It happened in two parts. I first read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

as a high school freshman in the 1980s and immediately fell in love with the story and the incredibly insightful author who wrote it. Throughout my dating years, I often thought back to the heroes and heroines Austen had developed so well. To me, they seemed timeless and, in many ways, universal. I suspected Jane's astute perception of human nature--so evident in her stories--would have made her an excellent judge of

character and the perfect person to give dating advice to a confused young woman, even in modern times. It had always been a personal fantasy that she'd give me her advice! Fastforward to 2004, I was attending a writing conference in Dallas and New York Times bestselling novelist Eloisa James was there, too, giving a great workshop on using plot ideas or themes from the classics. She asked our group which author we were most drawn to--Shakespeare, Dickens, the Brontes, etc.--and, of course, I thought first of Jane Austen. When I returned home, I began writing a contemporary story that featured Austen as a character helping a young woman through her relationship challenges and this eventually became my debut novel.

JD: Who is the book aimed at? Young gals, aging romantics, literary pop culture fans? All of the above?

MB: LOL! Ah, I'd love to say "all of the above," but I won't... Technically, the story is Women's Fiction, a genre devoted to plots involving a woman's journey toward greater self discovery. Because there are flashbacks to my main character's high school years, some readers have assumed that the book was geared toward young adults. But it's not--at least not in the sense of it being rated PG. There are very adult situations and language used throughout this novel. And while some older teens have read it and contacted me, telling me they appreciated the honest look I presented of the dating world, one of my main writing goals had been to show adult women how much of their self-esteem and relationship perceptions were often based on experiences they'd had as adolescents. How it becomes necessary to reevaluate many of those early beliefs about ourselves and others when we mature. As for fans of Austen, if the reader isn't a literary purist, the book may be a good fit. I didn't write a sequel to *Pride and Prejudice* or *Persuasion*; my novel is its own story. However, because I'm so convinced that Austen's characters are timeless, there are personality similarities that invariably arise. I also like to think that there are a few Austen characters living within each of us!

JD: How has your work as a library staff member and as a teacher influenced your work as a writer?

MB: Ever since I was in 2nd grade, libraries were my very favorite places--quiet and full of facts and stories. I remember thinking that when I was six, and I haven't revised my opinion in the years since. I could spend all day, every day, sampling literature and looking up bits of

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information. So, being able to actually work at a library for a few years was fascinating and fun for me, although each work environment I've experienced had its own unique community of interesting personalities. I spent about a decade as a teacher and that, too, was exciting and rewarding (sometimes it was also frustrating and exhausting!), but the most direct writerly gift of both the library world and the teaching one were in the collection of "characters" I encountered. Even spending one day in the classroom or one night at the library's checkout desk felt to me like a feast of character traits and humorous dialogue snippets. I didn't actually take notes (at least not most of the time...), but I truly felt I'd been let into a master class on characterization during my years of teaching and library work, and all I had to do was pay attention to the people who walked through the door. Whether or not those people would have appreciated knowing they were being studied is, of course, quite another matter!

JD: What's your writing practice like and what's your biggest distraction or obstacle these days?

MB: I enjoy blogging, email and online research, but the Internet is easily my biggest distraction. I wrote my entire first manuscript, which is still unpublished (According to Jane was my fifth manuscript), by hand because I didn't yet have a computer. I finished it in 7 months. Granted, it was dreadful, but it was also my first time working through a full-length novel of over 100,000 words, AND I had a baby in the house... Now, I have whole days of work time available to me, but I get pulled away too often by the lure of blogs and emails. As for my writing practice--well, during my hours offline, I spend several weeks plotting a novel with charts and beat sheets before beginning it. The opening scenes I draft best by hand, often very late at night when the house is extremely quiet. Once I've scribbled everywhere on those pages and have, maybe, a chapter or two, I type them up during the day, print them out and edit them on the paper. I need to do this a lot at the beginning in order to get the tone right and the characters set up the way I want them. Then it becomes a mixed bag--sometimes I compose on the screen, other times by hand--but I won't print out new pages until the end of every chapter and won't let myself edit too much until I have the first draft finished. Then it's revise, revise, let a trusted critique partner (CP) read it, revise some more, ask another CP or two to give it a shot, revise again and send it to my agent. And then revise and tweak based on her suggestions. In my experience, books aren't written, they're re-written!

JD: Why do you think Jane Austen is experiencing such a resurgence these days?

MB: The Austen novels themselves are set in England during the Georgian and Regency periods, which are delightfully escapist eras, especially with their fancy dress balls and drawing room intrigues. The pace of life was much slower and more reflective back then, and that's different and appealing. A kiss on the hand or a polite bow in the parlor held great meaning, and a heated look across a crowded ball room was the height of romanticism. I think it's easy for us modern creatures to be charmed by that time. But, despite the differences in era, Austen wrote about situations and personalities that almost all of us can relate to personally. Who hasn't had to deal with challenging family members, confusing romantic relationships, friends making mystifying decisions, snobbish acquaintances or the frustrations that simply come with testing our wings as an adult? To me, there is little difference between a high school's senior prom and a fancy Regency ball. The social dynamics are similar. The emotional highs and lows are comparable. Jane Austen got the human component absolutely right, in my opinion, and whether she's hanging out in the late 20th/early 21st century or back in the 1800s, readers want to be with someone who understands them.

Thanks so much, Marilyn! For more on this fab debut novelist, check out her site: <http://www.marilynbrant.com/>.

And for more on the craft of writing, please stop by my site <http://www.bangthekeys.com> or pick up the book, *Bang the Keys*.

Finally, our guest leaves us with this question: Do you have an author who's greatly influenced the way you perceive the world?

Do tell!

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by [MarilynBrant](#) on 02-03-2010 04:14 PM

Options

Thanks so much for hosting me, Jill. It's great fun to visit! And I really would love to know some of the readers' favorite writers (modern or classic). Yours, too!!

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by [lovesbooksER](#) on 02-03-2010 07:16 PM

Options

Marilyn, great interview! And you captured Jane's character perfectly in your book.

I was a freshman in high school too when I first read *Pride & Prejudice*. Then all of Jane Austen's other books. But I think the Nancy Drew books that I read many years earlier had a greater influence on me. All my heroines are strong and proactive like Nancy. Their cars are never as cool as hers, though. Neither are mine!

Permalink

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by [MarilynBrant](#) on 02-03-2010 07:59 PM

Options

Thank you, ER!! I can see why you'd love those Nancy Drew mysteries. I devoured them as a kid, too. And LOL about the cars! She always had a cool convertible...not remotely like my ancient Honda. :-)

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