

JULIE ANNE LONG IN CONVERSATION
WITH TAYLOR THOMAS



NDR: *I want to start by asking about your journey to historical romance. What kind of journey brought you to this genre?*

JAL: I always wanted to be a writer and the whole point of learning how to write seemed to be so I could write stories. I remember sitting by the bookcase in my family's living room (where the books had no pictures, you know, and just endless words) and just going through them and making up stories for them. So when I finally learned to read and write it was like, "Yes! Time to write stories!" We lived in...a house that was stuffed with books and it was very egalitarian in that we had every kind of book you could imagine,

and I read them all. We had Wallace Stegner and Rosemary Rogers and all the 70's books from *Chariots of the Gods* to *Bhagavad Gita*—I read them all.

It was the [books] in my mom's nightstand drawer that were the most intriguing; the ones you sneaked out—the Laurie McBains, the Rosemary Rogers novels—they were fascinating, and I got in trouble for sneaking them out. I loved them all and we didn't differentiate. There wasn't any sort of hierarchy—all of the books were considered equal in the house.

I wanted to be a writer, but I also equally loved music—I was passionate about music. So, I started a band, and we were fairly successful in the San Francisco Bay area. I played guitar and wrote songs and while I did that I worked a series of corporate jobs. I worked in global finance and I worked as a communications specialist—yeah not very exciting—and a graphic designer. Then there came a point where my band broke up, we were doing the first dotcom wave and it imploded, I was working part-time, I was a little broke, my friends moved away, you know it was one of those things where this was the time where there was nothing else to do. So I applied myself to writing my first novel and it was *The Runaway Duke* and I based it on a book in the 80s, and it was huge, it was called *Through a Glass Darkly*, and that's what I was thinking of—I wanted to write something sweeping and fun and rich and so that's what I set out to do. And I finished it and I sent it to the only agent in San Francisco (where I was living and where I still live at the moment) and she took me on and we sold it to Warner Books, which is now Hachette, and the rest is history, I guess. Initially it was like 500 pages long which apparently is a no-no when it comes to romance so it was “genre-fied”, significant changes were made, and uh, yep, that was it. I've been doing that since 2004.

NDR: *What is your writing process like for each book and/or series?*

JAL: Let's see... I sorta sit with an idea and wait for something to occur to me like an inspiration: Who do I want to write about? What kind of people do I want to spend an entire book with? And I wait for that idea to occur. Once I know who I want to write about and what the conflict will be, I wait for them to start talking to me, if that makes sense? Because it always starts with dialogue—that's how you get to know your characters, and that's how your story will unfurl from there once you know your characters. And often when you are writing a romance your plot is very emotion-centered and centered around the hero and heroine and so it's helpful to start, um... I almost never start at the beginning, but I will start with what we call a “love” scene or some kind of argument because that's how I'll start to get to

know how the characters are together. But I always write out of order—I almost never start at the beginning.

The way I've found it useful to describe—there's a couple of ways I've found useful to describe it—one is that it's like an archeological dig, like you know the entire story is there, but the pieces are out of order and you don't know quite how they are going to fit yet, but you're gonna unearth them a little bit at a time. Or the other one is kind of like when you're filming a movie and when they're filming a movie, you wait for the conditions to be right—like they never film in sequence, right? It has to do with how you're feeling that day, where the inspiration is, where the light is, you know? You work on a particular scene on a particular day because you're really feeling it and it's really, um, you have a certain momentum or a rhythm surrounding that scene.

And I often jump from scene to scene too. If I'm writing something that's fairly intense emotionally and I get overstimulated or stuck or it's very nuanced and it becomes a little bit persnickety, I'll just move onto another scene cause it's like getting a fresh point of view.

And it all goes into one document—I skip around a lot—and it's an open Office document and I only write one draft because I edit it as I go because that's the fun part for me: getting the words right. You know, it's the fun, delicious part for me so that's what keeps me motivated to write. And I listen to music all the time when I write. Lately during the lockdown, it was Brown Noise plus music because brontosaurus live upstairs. (laughs).

NDR: *What is the historical research like when tackling a new novel and has this process changed for you over time?*

JAL: Usually it occurs simultaneously with whatever book I'm writing. How much, or the degree required, depends on whatever I'm writing about. There are some that are very house party centered, for instance, and you're not going to do a lot of research about that necessarily, but others, like the one I wrote most recently, *You Were Made to Be Mine*, was interesting. It was fun to research that—about espionage and the alien office during the Napoleonic Wars and there are things you would need to—there is a base-line degree of research that needs to take place before you can start writing and there are other things you can look up as you go. It's usually a combination of books and there's such a wealth of information online now and usually I will find it online and verify it with a couple of sources.

NDR: *Which character, if any, do you feel most connects to you as a person and*

why?

JAL: They all do. I've always maintained that every work of fiction we write is autobiographical right? Because we can only filter it through our experiences or our voice so everything we write is an interpretation of the world through our—whatever lens we are equipped with, right? So, I'm all of those characters—there's some aspect of me in every single one of those characters. For instance, like in *After Dark* with the Duke you know I'm the opera singer who does a shot when she's nervous and is excited to get hothouse roses and I'm the duke who is a national icon?? (13:20) and has had so many experiences and has no patience for foolishness or "BS" anymore but he likes to be in a room with people who are talking—as long as he doesn't have to, you know—he just wants to be around people and not be bothered. So every single character is an aspect of me, but I wouldn't say that any of them are based on any other specific individuals. It's not fun that way—it's more fun to make them up. They take on a life of their own once you start writing, but...

NDR: *But you're right. There's a little piece of you every time even if you try not to, there really is.*

JAL: And it's based on empathy too! Once you start writing the only thing that makes characters feel authentic is if you are actually living that character. And so empathy makes them feel real and empathy comes from you: empathy for that character, understanding of that character, embodying that character comes from you.

NDR: *Sexism and misogyny still manage to find a home within our world. Particularly within the romance writing world, we often face criticism—both warranted and unwarranted. As a longtime romance writer, do you still find yourself defending your chosen genre or does it become "easier" as you publish more novels?*

JAL: You know the notion that romance needs to be defended—like the word defend means, to me, implies that something needs to be justified or rationalized. And romance as a genre is a juggernaut, right? It's the most popular genre. It's arguably what keeps the lights on at publishers, you know? And millions of people around the world have enjoyed romances and it's a prevailing genre because people want to fall in love; it's a commonality that we all have. So, I don't defend it. It doesn't require defending—sometimes it requires explaining. I'm puzzled by someone's perception of it, but

no, romance has nothing to apologize for or defend. It's a—I think one of your questions addresses whether it's "legitimate" or more or less legitimate and it's like, "What is that? I don't understand." (laughs).

NDR: *I completely agree. When people bring that up, I think, "Why are you asking me this? Would you ask this of me for any other genre in general? Especially the male-dominated ones."*

JAL: Right! There's some of that—and I have a lot of theories, but you have another question that ties into it—but it's probably rooted in some form of misogyny or sexism because it's something that women usually enjoy, but when you pan out from that, the way that people understand romance... I mean the reason bestseller lists exist and the reason ACT scores exist is because we like to rank ourselves. The way we understand our world and the way we understand ourselves is through comparison so the notion that something is "better than" or "less than" something else is a product of marketing. And that snobbery is a product of marketing too.

There's this lovely quote from Peter Schjeldahl, who's an art critic for *The New Yorker*, and I remember he said something about, "The same goes for snobbery, a necessary stage for the insecure until we acquire taste that admits and reflects the variety of experience." So, it's really a form of immaturity. (laughs) And I feel like if kindness is the ultimate maturity, then snobbery is—implicit in the word is that in order to elevate one thing you have to be derogatory towards another thing—and it's possible to be passionate about one thing without negating another thing. It's possible to be passionate about one thing without trampling on the joy other people are taking in something else.

NDR: *Going off the previous question, the literary world can also be isolating in its pretentiousness and snobbery. Do you find any difficulty navigating the literary world as a writer especially when romance is often seen as "less legitimate" than other genres?*

JAL: Mostly, no, and part of that is because in our little silos that we have on social media and in our writing world, you know, I associate with other romance authors and other authors in general and they know how hard it is to write a book period. (laughs) And so, once you know that, that tendency to view something as "superior" goes away. The other thing is there's a perception that writing a romance is "easy," but once people try? They find that it's not. I think it was Nora Roberts who said that it's like danc-

ing *Swan Lake* in a phone booth. (laughs) It's difficult—it's not easy. It's the challenge to keep it emotional, to keep the pacing tight, all that is actually very difficult within the lines, so I think once writers discover that that also eliminates the aspect of or any temptation to describe it as "less legitimate" than another genre.

But also, it tends to come from people who don't know what romance is. We were talking earlier how it's rooted for some reason in the Fabio era and so when I encounter that usually I say, "Oh so you formed your opinion, but you must have read a lot of romances to arrive at that opinion?" It brings people up short because they are spouting something like where did that originate? Where did your opinion originate? They often can't answer the question—it's just been an accepted, for whatever reason, just an accepted way to discuss romance.

I think a useful way to describe it to people who would denigrate it or who are unfamiliar with the genre is to picture a buffet table the length of a football field and on it is every imaginable kind of food. There are heaping bowls of Cheetos and there are delicious Lumpia (Filipino food) and there's kebabs and gorgeous vertical, fancy food from French Laundry or Alinea—everything. And so, if you walk up to the table and sample one thing and don't like it and you walk away and go, "I don't like it." I mean, you can't say that about romance. Romance is too vast and diverse at this point—that is what romance is. You can't draw a conclusion about the genre from reading one book. There are hundreds of thousands of voices and every imaginable subgenre—so that is what romance is. Quality is subjective. I tend to read for voice, but other people read for story or for trope, and it's all good. It's all relevant.

Another thing is that the romance community, and the people who read it, are passionate readers, voracious readers, and they don't just read romance. They are smart, they're connected, they're super organized, they're creative—you know all these people—it's fantastic. I don't know why you would want to alienate, if you're a writer or a bookseller, I don't know why you want to alienate any of those people because they are book buyers and consumers.

NDR: *What advice would you give to emerging writers?*

JAL: I would say read a lot. Read widely—read every genre... well you don't have to read *every* genre. (laughs) But read beyond your genre because you can learn from every writer. You can learn about voice, about pacing, about word choice, about plotting. You can absorb through osmosis, or you can

study it. I find that reading writers that I find are fantastic are kind of the way I put a sort of music in my head as I write. I want to read really wonderful writing while I'm writing and it's usually something different every time.

Finish what you write I think is a main thing. If you want to be a writer, you need know how to do that. You can always fix what sucks, if you think it sucks, or you could always move on to the next thing. Just finish it. Don't write in a vacuum. There's a community out there of people who can answer your questions, be supportive, tap you into books you can read, get feedback from your own work, et cetera, I think those are the main things.

NDR: *Finally, can you discuss which writers you believe are doing good work in the literary world, particularly within the romance genre?*

JAL: I read less romance now because it feels like homework. (laughs) Because I can't lose myself in it now because you're looking at structure—it's kind of like when I used to play in a band, when I'd hear a song on the radio and I'm like, "Why's the baseline buried?" It's that kind of thing. You see it as its component parts.

And I read my friends' books. KJ Charles, have you heard of KJ Charles? She writes *The Will Darling* series and *After the Great War*—I love her voice: very smart, very elegant writer. I love Lorraine Heath—she is very emotional, interesting plots—I enjoy her work. Loretta Chase is another writer who's voice I really like. I tend to really read for voice.

NDR: I am the same way. (laughs)

JAL: I want to give a shoutout to Julia Quinn because what she has accomplished and the joy her books have brought to so many people around the world—I mean, she is a sweetheart and *Bridgerton* is a powerhouse. I love her and her voice.

But as I'm reading, I tend to read a lot of things that are romance-adjacent like Amor Towles—love his work lately and I've been enjoying that a lot. Kate Atkinson, love her work—those are people who are defaults, just instant buys for me. I like Louise Penny, I like Elly Griffiths, and I love P. D. James and Ruth Rendell—they're writing mysteries but their characterization and their voice and the way they write—I can't get enough of it. I have also been delving into Laurie Colwin who died in the mid-90s and when I found that out it made me so angry because I was like, "I don't get to read anymore books?" I just love her and her voice is

fantastic and warm and unique. I even discovered another writer who's fantastic and she started writing in the 30s named Margery Sharp and she wrote books for adults and for children—but her adult books especially her ones, the Martha series, about an artist. They are fantastic. So, I do a lot of, I call it, esoteric exploring. (laughs) I like Faith Baldwin who started writing romances in the 30s through the 70s, and it's fascinating because not only was she a great writer—she's very sparkling—they made some movies of a couple of her books in the 30s like *Skyscraper Souls*. When you think of the 30s screwball comedies and things like that, it's fascinating to see how tropes and things have changed and how they are reflections of the mundane lives in many ways of women so romance has become a sort of important historical document.