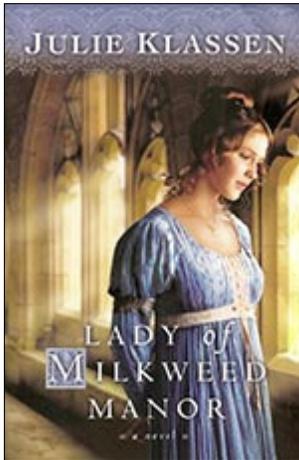


Readin' & Writin' with Lauraine- April 2008



Today feels and looks like Spring, especially after yesterday's snow. I should have been thinking of garden books to review. However the book I chose for this month is a classic example of good Regency, not my favorite era, but it does have to do with gardening, hence the title, *Lady of Milkweed Manor*.

Until I read this book, I had no idea Milkweed (which I keep around in my garden for the Monarch butterflies), is also known for its medicinal applications. You never know what you'll learn from novels--another good reason for reading more of them.

This line on the back cover caught my attention:

“Even a proper Vicar’s daughter can make a mistake...”

Then the opening line on the first page was about a little girl grubby from gardening. I love the abundance of an English cottage garden, and I knew I was hooked.

So I met Charlotte Lamb, who was packing to leave her father's house because she was enceinte. She would spend the rest of her pregnancy at a lying-in house called Milkweed Manor in London, along with other young women who'd also made mistakes.

Charlotte is used to taking care of others and continues to do so in her new—and far less amenable—home, all the while refusing to name the father of her baby. When a young doctor she knows from home appears to care for the young women, she is afraid her secret hideaway will be exposed, since her father banished her and no one in her family knows where she is. A reader cannot help but admire Charlotte, and rebel against the mores of her day, admiring her sacrificial love that only her faith can see her through.

Author Julie Klassen packed a lot of research into her novel, adding depth to this story far beyond those typical of the Regency genre, a genre which seems to be returning to popularity after a time of disfavor. Her very real characters with their rigid social strictures of the day made me glad I live in the present day, and yet the heartbreaks and overcoming love are no different than those we face now. That's one of the values of a good story, the ability to transcend time and distance.

So what can writers take from this story? We've talked about research in the past, Julie traveled to England to assist her in her writing.

I find visiting the sites of my novels invaluable in creating a setting that makes the story richer. What does the breeze smell like, the weather feel like? What do the clouds look like?

You might not realize how different these all can be until you go there. Plus, visiting the area might bring stories to you through the people you meet that you wouldn't have known otherwise. Research needs to include talking to as many people as possible.

Many books, pamphlets and pictures can be found in small historical societies and museums, a wealth of material not available on the Internet. If you have a character doing something, you will describe it better if you have done it yourself. I found that napping flint took a sure hand. No surprise to those who make arrow heads from flint but a surprise to me.

Research isn't just for historical writers, either. I visited a prison in upstate New York, where some of the inmates were involved in Thoroughbred rehabilitation-- the first place where The Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation started such a program. Although I set my novel, *Breaking Free*, in California, I never could have written it with such realism had I not gone to that prison in New York.

While researching one story, you might even run across others, an added benefit.

Something of a more recent benefit: many books now include discussion questions. You'll find discussion questions to ponder, along with a strong and entertaining story that you'll finish with a sigh, in the pages of *Lady of Milkweed Manor* by Julie Klassen.

Read it and tell your friends to buy it too. That's the best advertising there is: happy readers who tell others. Something else you can do to help your favorite authors is to go online to Amazon and other sites and post a short review of the book.

And now, I need to go finish my current book and plant my new roses

Until next time,

Happy Spring, and Happy Readin' and Writin' from Lauraine