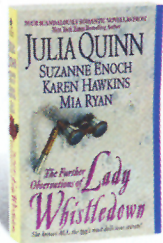


Rewriting the Romance

Bodice rippers are more popular than ever, and Julia Quinn is taking them into the postfeminist future

By LEV GROSSMAN



THERE ARE TWO GREAT things about reviewing a romance novel. One is that you don't have to be worried about giving away the ending. Even though Susannah Ballister is stubborn and not conventionally pretty and the Earl of

Renminster is stiff and pompous, I will tell you right now: they hook up. Here's the other great thing about reviewing romance novels: people actually read them.

A few statistics: romance novels are read by 51 million Americans. They account for more than half of all paperback fiction sold in the U.S. If you thought feminism, postmodernism and the Internet had done away with the romance novel, think again. The number of romance-novel readers in the U.S. has risen 18% since 1998. One reason: romance novels are changing. Julia Quinn, whose *The Further Observations of Lady Whistledown* (Avon; 391 pages) tells the story of Ballister and Renminster, is one of the people changing them.

Julia Quinn isn't who you think she is. For starters, she isn't really Julia Quinn. That's just a pseudonym she chose so her books would be shelved next to those of the best-selling romance writer Amanda Quick. What's more, she's not a little old lady with a dozen cats. Julia Quinn is Julie Pottinger, 33, a smart, ambitious Harvard graduate. Quinn spent two years after college fulfilling her pre-med requirements, then went to Yale medical school. But after two months she dropped out to pursue her true purpose in life: writing romance novels.

Quinn's specialty is Regency romances, which are set in the England of the early 1800s—think Jane Austen. There are eight subgenres of romance in all, including paranormal romance (which involves magic and the supernatural) and time-travel romance (love conquers all, including the space-time continuum). This kind of specialization is typical of the genre—romance novels are marketed more like computers or Tupperware than books. They are not

works of art. They are highly targeted commodities, engineered to a set of tightly controlled specifications. The formula seems to work: romance novels rang up \$1.5 billion in retail sales last year.

But if so many people are buying them, how come nobody wants to admit it? In part because until a few years ago, romance novels deserved their bad reputation. "People who don't read romance novels still have the perception that they are what they were

brooding." He is not a sexual predator either. "I can't think of anything in my books that any feminist would find objectionable," Quinn says. "And I consider myself a feminist."

Quinn's latest book, *The Further Observations of Lady Whistledown*, is a set of four novellas by four authors, including Quinn; it's a kind of Julia Quinn production. The stories are all organized around a tart gossip columnist who appears in several of Quinn's novels. Quinn has a smart, funny touch with dialogue that's reminiscent of *Bridget Jones* author Helen Fielding's, and Quinn's characters have a roundness to them that's surprising and appealing. On the grand scale of emotional power, her work delivers about the same punch as a *Friends* episode—which is to



REX/ISTED FOR TIME

LOVE STORY: Quinn, a.k.a. Julie Pottinger, left Yale medical school to write romance novels

in the 1970s or '80s," Quinn says. "The heroines were doormats, with all these alpha males bossing them around. I can't imagine a romance novel published today where the hero rapes the heroine and she falls in love with him."

Writers like Quinn are reinventing the romance novel for the postfeminist generation. Although she hasn't discarded the conventions of romance, Quinn is more than willing to tweak them. In *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, her 11th novel, which spent a month on the New York *Times* paperback best-seller list last summer, the heroine is a plump wallflower. Her hero actually complains, with a sigh, that he isn't "dark and

say, it isn't Faulkner, but it's nothing one should be embarrassed to read in public.

In her next novel, Quinn plans to explore some darker themes—the hero is a widower whose late wife suffered from clinical depression. It's an interesting direction for a romance writer, one that might bring her perilously close to literary respectability. As she points out, "You always get more respect when you don't have a happy ending." So is she tempted to trade in her soft-focus covers for cultural credibility? To end, just once, with a funeral instead of a wedding? "Oh, no!" Quinn says quickly. "I have a mortgage." —With reporting by

Andrea Sachs/Seattle

“You always get more respect when you don't have a happy ending.” —JULIA QUINN