

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JESSICA DOTTA

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Jessica Dotta

Congratulations on your forthcoming trilogy, Jessica, and thanks for talking about it with me. Just because your books are set in England doesn't mean you're not a Southern author, right? Why don't we begin with some publicity: tell us about your debut novel—and the whole trilogy for that matter.

Thank you so much, Allen! I really appreciate your taking time to interview me.

The Price of Privilege trilogy is set in Victorian England and is narrated by the protagonist Julia Elliston, who after a lifetime of silence has decided to set the record straight about the great scandal she caused in her teens.

Born of Persuasion begins the account with seventeen-year-old Julia. She's recently orphaned and living on the charity of an anonymous guardian who intends to establish her as a servant in far-off Scotland. She has two months to devise a better plan.

Her first choice, to marry her childhood sweetheart, is denied when she discovers he's made a change of faith. But when a titled dowager offers to introduce Julia into society, a realm of possibilities opens. Treachery and deception, however, are as much a part of Victorian society as titles and decorum, and Julia quickly discovers her present is deeply entangled with her mother's mysterious past. With no laws to protect her, she must unravel the secrets on her own.

I'm curious: how did the trilogy come about? Or is it still in the works? In other words, did you set out to write a trilogy, or was your book so long that someone advised you to separate it into divisions?

It started with a single scene I penned in my teens. I had just finished *Jane Eyre* and was wild with enthusiasm at its singular style and storyline. It was the first novel where I couldn't predict the ending and therefore I felt unsafe. I lost two nights' sleep, turning pages, wondering what would happen. I had no idea stories could be that wild and free. That scene is the opening to Chapter Ten.

From there, the story just plain haunted me. The scene raised interesting questions, and I wanted to know why the characters were acting the way they were. They were awful. It also revealed a lot about my protagonist's past, and I wanted answers to those questions, as well.

When I finally started writing, I only had planned up to the most devastating moment in the novel. As I began to write the aftermath, it turned into Book Two, with its own complete set of problems. I had 400K written with a plan for Book Three.

So I divided what I had into two books and labored to bring each of those 200K words into a 100-130K word story. In some ways, the characters are deeper because of this process—I know more about them than I can possibly put into a novel. Other times, I've had to go back and forth with Tyndale's amazing editing team, in order to make the motivation of the character clearer or explain how it ties into the story. I cut a lot of scenes and choosing the ones that needed to stay isn't easy.

***Downton Abbey* is quite the television series. Your books will appeal to the audience of that series. What is it about this Edwardian period and British genre that appeals to Americans? William Deresiewicz refers to this phenomenon as "America's love affair with the English aristocracy." Why this love affair?**

Love this question! I think to do it justice I need to answer it in parts. As far as English aristocracy—how can we not have a fascination? If Britain is our distant cousin, then its aristocracy is our elegant yet condescending aunt, who once visited and left behind an indelible impression.

Yet, I don't fully agree with Mr. Deresiewicz that the fascination stays strictly within aristocracy. We love to follow the Grantham family, particularly the dowager countess, but what makes us adore *Downton Abbey* is the staff. What would the show be without Carson's high standards, Bates' dignity or Daisy's struggle for equality?

Why does the Edwardian era particularly seem to fascinate? I believe it's because the changes wrought during that period are still affecting us today. On this side of history, we can watch the stories unfold with a sense of standing on the moral high ground. Should a maid be allowed to better her life by becoming a secretary? Of course, we cry, as we watch the rest of society frown upon her for daring to question convention. We know for whom we're rooting. We're cheering for our own value system.

It grows more difficult when one dips into other eras. There are completely foreign values at play as we follow the characters' struggles. In this case, the writer's job is to ensure that the reader understands the restraints the era. When they do, stories from other eras dazzle as well. The Tudor period of history is a good example of this. King Henry VIII's court is alive and well today. You'd be surprised how well the modern woman can debate whether Anne Boleyn was a huntress or a victim. Authors like Philippa Gregory have done an outstanding job making that society come alive. No one reads her books and wonders why Jane Seymour didn't refuse the King's attention. They are fully aware of the consequences she would reap.

Do you share this love affair?

Yes, I do. I love the Regency, Victorian, and Edwardian eras, but with eyes wide open.

While I love the elegance of each era—the charm of tea, lawn parties, and bustling gowns, I am not fooled into wishing I born during that period. My parents are laborers, and as such, I would have been lucky to gain employment as a scullery maid, and they had the cruelest workload. I have several friends who would have died in childbirth. My own daughter wouldn't have survived long. I've taken several trips to the ER in the middle of the night for acute croup. Right now, I share custody of my daughter, but in the Regency and Victorian eras, I would have had no legal right to even visit her. Fathers automatically had sole custody of children in a divorce. (Not that divorces could be obtained except by an act of Parliament.) When one understands the precariousness of women in that time period, it makes wonderful drama, but I wouldn't want to have lived there.

Much better to buy Downton Abbey inspired clothing, host a tea party for friends, and then slip back into your jeans and modern life.

Julia Elliston. Let's talk about her. She's your protagonist. Where did she come from? I don't mean her background or biography in the novel—I mean as a product of your imagination. How and why did you create her?

Julia Elliston is not an average protagonist. Her characterization receives polar reactions from readers. Some find her unlikable, some humorous, and others think her isolation is heartbreaking. We don't always know what we're writing until we've finished, and it is so with Julia. From the very beginning of the novel I "allowed" Julia to steer the story so to speak, without trying to soften her. (Actually, I couldn't if I wanted to. I developed writer's block every time I attempted to write her differently.) Looking back, I see that I was exploring my own coming of age difficulties. I grew up in a household with very strict views on women and their roles. I have been complimented many times on my ability to bring the reader into the Victorian mindset, but the truth is I was brought up under that mindset; therefore, it is not difficult for me to capture.

This is your debut work. *Southern Literary Review* receives emails from aspiring writers all the time. We get questions about conferences and workshops, about authors and writing

communities. Our readers always seem to be curious about how they can produce their first work. What advice do you have for these readers—any words of encouragement?

Attend writer conferences, network, and never give up. But I know everybody says that, so with the disclaimer that it really is the best advice I can give, here's what I suggest to writers I've critiqued or mentored.

1. Go to the The Gutenberg Project, download and work through [The Century Handbook of Writing](#) by Garland Greever and Easley S. Jones. Better yet, team up with another writer and pledge to work through it together, ensuring you really learn its concepts.
2. Read books that make you despair of ever writing as well as those authors.
3. Learn as much about the publishing industry as possible. Many feel that once they're offered a contract, their work is done. That's only true if they don't plan to publish again, or are very, very lucky. There's as much work after publication as there is prior to it.
4. When discouraged, read [For The Young Who Want To](#) by Marge Peirce. It will help on your worst days.
5. Set up a fun routine for rejection letters. I used to sing "Another One Bites the Dust" as I filed the newest rejection. It cheered me.

Thanks for taking the time, Jessica. We at *Southern Literary Review* wish you the best and look forward to the publication of your trilogy.

Thank you so much for inviting me!

Click here to purchase *Born of Persuasion*:

