

## *Mary Balogh: Regency Romance's Shining Star*

(February 12, 1998)

Mary Balogh occupies the minds of many on-line readers; indeed, at least ten percent of the messages on the [AAR List](#) are about Mary and her books. And even though I'm not much of a Regency Romance reader, I know enough to recognize sparkling wit, deft characterizations, and brilliant writing.

I spoke with Mary last night, and had to pick my jaw up off the floor after she told me she'd written her very last Regency Romance. Then we settled into a fascinating conversation about her writing and how she sees the current state of romantic fiction.

**Laurie Likes Books:** What do you think are the differences between people in historical novels and now? Human nature is the same, but how do different historical times affect the interactions of your characters?

**Mary Balogh:**

I write the Regency and Georgian periods, so I'll limit my comments to then. I'll just mention a few key points. The attitudes between men and women - it has to be politically correct even when you're writing historicals. You're going to alienate readers if you have terribly domineering men and very submissive women. That might be an historically accurate way to look at men and women, but you really can't get away with that in modern novels. You have to somehow skirt around that and make the heroes sensitive to women and respect them even while obviously they were a bit more dominating than modern men would be. You have to do the corresponding thing with women. They have to be a little more submissive. They weren't independent. They were possessions rather than persons in the regency era. But you couldn't get away with that image of a woman in a modern romance so you have to give them strength of character. At the same time you have to make them true to their own time. That's the trick. Make them historically accurate and yet acceptable to modern readers.

**LLB:** Talk more about political correctness in romance. Do you feel limited, does it bother you to write in those P.C. constraints or do you think it's perfectly acceptable since you are writing today even though the books are set 170 years ago?

**Mary:**

I don't like to be historically inaccurate. Some books annoy me when I find heroines in particular far too independent and sort of savvy for their historical time. I like to use as my model actual books that were written at the time. I always cite Pride & Prejudice and Jane Eyre, obviously written by authors at the time, as books that are obviously true to their times. There's a great air of independence and dignity about the heroines from these books. They are very true to themselves even if it means losing their man. Elizabeth Bennett, although obviously in love with D'arcy, actually gives him up because of his terrible pride and condescension to her. Jane Eyre gives up Mr. Rochester for different reasons. They have this strength to give everything up, which was a much worse fate in those days when women had far fewer options. They were prepared for a very dreary

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spinsterhood for the rest of their lives. They had that strength of character. And so I try to do that sort of thing with my books. I don't want my heroines to be 20th century characters wearing regency dress because that would not be true historically, yet at the same time, I don't want to have my heroines be terribly submissive and victims of the system. I want to be accessible to modern readers and yet historically true.

**LLB:** You write both Regency Romance and historicals set in the regency. Do you treat the historicals differently or do you take the same approach?

**Mary::**

My Regencies are really not Regencies. I have never made any differentiation between my Regencies and my historicals right from my first Regency. I wrote it just as I would write any other book. To me, a Regency is just a book set in the regency era and it has to be true to the era. The same applies to an historical. Apart from length and the sort of wider scope that a greater length gives you, I don't approach them differently. It's not just a difference in length, of course; there's a structural difference, but that's not what you're talking about.

**LLB:** An author who has written both says Regencies are about words and historicals are about passion. Can you comment on that?

**Mary:**

I think I have always taken the point that a romantic novel is about passion. To me, a Regency is a romantic novel and I don't think of a Regency as something different from any other historical novel. I know what she means - manners are so much a part of what the regency world was, but they have as important a part in the historical romance. My books are basically about passion.

**LLB:** You are known as an author who has broken the boundaries of the Regency Romance. What keeps coming up is that you really do break some of the rules. Your books have a lot more sexual content than the typical Regency. A few of you (Mary Jo Putney, Jo Beverley) were ground-breakers in this, and other authors such as Karen Harbaugh are continuing to break the boundaries in new and exciting ways. What was it like at the beginning, what did your publisher say, and did you feel like a pioneer?

**Mary:**

I think I did. My very first book had explicit sex in it and it was accepted right away. When I submitted my second book, and that was also to have explicit sex, I think my editor was a little wary. She had this stereotype of little old ladies reading Regencies who wouldn't like it. My experience has told me that these very same little old ladies are among my biggest fans of these more explicit books. Another point I would make is about rules. I always sort of sit up and take notice when people use this word about Regencies. People always say there are rules about Regencies. What are these rules? Who made them up? I'd like to see this list of rules!

**LLB:** I'm glad to hear you say that! Whenever I ask a good Regency author the same question, the answer is pretty much the same. You have so many books with characters from other books. Can you tell me which books are interrelated?

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Mary faxed me the following list of her related Regencies (please note that two of the series themselves are related via **A Christmas Bride**):

- **A Chance Encounter** and **The Wood Nymph**
- **The Trysting Place**, **The Counterfeit Betrothal**, and **The Notorious Rake**
- **The First Snowdrop** and **A Christmas Belle**
- **The Gilded Web**, **A Promise of Spring**, **Web of Love**, and **Devil's Web**
- **The Ideal Wife**, **A Precious Jewel**, and **A Christmas Bride**
- **Courting Julia**, **Dancing with Clara**, and **Tempting Harriet**
- **Dark Angel**, **Lord Carew's Bride**, **The Famous Heroine**, **The Plumed Bonnet**, and **A Christmas Bride**
- **Indiscreet**, **Unforgiven**, and **Irresistible**

**LLB:** Tell me more about relating books to one another. Is it a plan, a method to anchor stories? Why do you do this so often? And how was it that you ended up bridging two different series of books with your recent release **A Christmas Bride** (which was the top choice of my readers for Regency Romance of the year)?

**Mary:**

There are several reasons why I do this. One reason is that minor characters intrigue me. Very often there will be a minor character in a book that I just invent purely for some minor purpose but that character sort of grabs hold of me and I decide I've got to tell their story. Sometimes it's deliberate - I'll plan out a group of characters and want them each to have their own story. Other times I've got a hero and I try to invent a heroine for him and I suddenly remember a character from an earlier book and think she would be the perfect heroine for him. I'll pull her out of that book and there she is. If the hero comes from a set of books and his heroine comes from another set of books, then suddenly you are drawing together two sets of books. All these old characters from two completely different sets of books co-mingling in this new one.

**LLB:** Some authors spend so much time talking about the older characters in a sequel that the hero and heroine of the new book don't seem to be as interesting or as important. How do you balance this so it doesn't happen in your books?

**Mary:**

To me, the romance, the passion of the romance between two people, is the be-all and end-all of a book. I never allow plot or setting or certainly other characters to interfere with the romance. To me it's such an exciting thing. I can't understand when I read books sometimes that the plot has become so important to the writer that the romance sort of gets lost.

**LLB:** What sparked your interest in writing romance?

**Mary:**

I didn't read romance until I was in my 30's. I grew up in Wales to sort of look down on romance. And yet, when I look back at my favorite books from my teens, I find that books like **Jane Eyre**, **Pride & Prejudice**, and Sir Walter Scott's books, are all at the top of the list. When I ask myself why, it's because they are romances. The interest has always been there. My first real contact with the genre was when I pulled a Harlequin out

Preguntas más frecuentes

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- A Christmas Carol and The Wreck of the Titan
- The Taming of the Shrew, The Merchant of Venice, and The Merry Wives of Windsor
- The First Wives Club and A Christmas Carol
- The Gilded Age, A Christmas Carol, and Devil's Wife
- The First Wives Club, A Christmas Carol, and A Christmas Carol
- Counting Like: Learning with Class and Teaching Harriet
- Dark Angel, Lord of the Flies, The Passion of Joan of Arc, and A Christmas Carol
- Indivisible: Changing and Inspiring

ALA: Tell me more about relating books to one another. Is it a plan, a method to anchor stories? Why do you do this so often? And how was it that you ended up bringing two different series of books with your recent release A Christmas Carol (which was the top choice of my readers for Holiday Romance of the Year)?

Wendy:

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of clearance box. It was one of Anne Mather's books called **No Gentle Possession** and I was very entertained. I thought I could do that and wrote two two Harlequin-type books which were both rejected, and they deserved to be rejected. And then I got hooked on Regency Romance. I was teaching English and on maternity leave, reading my way through a grade 11 reading list and one of Georgette Heyer's books was on it, and I'd never read her before. The book was **Frederica** and I was totally enchanted by it - it changed my life. I read everything of hers I could get my hands on and discovered other people were doing this and that's when I started writing them myself.

*LLB:* When was this?

*Mary:*

I started writing my own at the end of 1983, in Canada.

*LLB:* How did you start in Wales and end up in Canada?

*Mary:*

I grew up in Wales and went to University there and when I was finishing, I thought I would travel around for a few years. Teaching was a good way to do that because there was a huge shortage of teachers all over the world at that time (this was 1967). I applied to 9 different countries and the first interview I had was in Saskatchewan, Canada. I came here on a 2-year teaching contract and met the man who became my husband. He was a farmer, and once you marry a farmer, you put down roots.

*LLB:* You do both Regency Romance and historicals set in the regency era. So many authors start out doing Regencies and stop. Are you going to continue doing them?

*Mary:*

Actually, no. I've just written the last one, very, very sadly. It will be out this November. What happened was that I was talking with Dell about a contract. They very much wanted to acquire me and to promote me. To them it's essential that they have entire control of my career, so they insisted that if I signed with them, that I sign an exclusive contract with them. It was a difficult decision. But I thought it would be interesting. I will have done about 45 Regencies once that last one is released in November. My contract with Dell is for two full-length historicals.

*LLB:* There's often discussion about your Regencies versus your historicals. Many readers think your Regencies are better. Have you heard this before?

*Mary:*

I'm always interested in comparing reader favorites, but, yes, I think I am aware that there are those who prefer my Regencies, but, what can I say - "You're wrong, the other group is just as good as this group (of books)?" Reading tastes are such personal things. I can understand why readers might enjoy the Regencies more, because they're shorter. They can be read in one sitting and that's satisfying, especially if it's an intense book. On the other hand, I can appreciate why some would prefer the wider scope of the historicals. I often will read a book, judge it, and give it a score, and then go to *Romantic Times* and compare ratings. They are invariably totally different. My favorites are one's or two's, and books that I have a hard time finishing get a 4+ from *RT*. It's not that they're

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wrong and I'm right, it's just a matter of taste.

**LLB:** You are very prolific. How do you do it, write so many books while still maintaining quality?

**Mary:** When I write a book, to me, it's such an emotional experience that I have to do it quickly. It always amazes me when people tell me it takes them a year to write a book. Indeed, I wrote *A Precious Jewel* in two weeks! I don't know how they could keep the focus or the emotional intensity spread over that long a time.

**LLB:** Have you ever experienced burnout?

**Mary:**

No. I think I'm a workaholic. If I decide to "rest" between books and take off maybe two months, I find that after a few weeks, I'm just itching to get back to writing.

**LLB:** There's a lot of humor in some of your books. There's so much wit in Jane Austen, for instance. Is that part and parcel of a good Regency, that sparkling humor?

**Mary:**

I think it is. I think one of the "rules" of Regency, if there are any, is wit. I'm not sure the historical age itself was more witty than ours, but I think we've perhaps taken it the marvelous wit from Jane Austen and Georgette Heyer. It does seem to suit the age, so, yes, it is something I aim for. A couple have been written as outright farces. The Famous Heroine was one of those.

**LLB:** Oh, I so agree. When I think about the outlandish getups the hero wore. . . .

**Mary:**

His lavender cloak? Yes, he was a character from another book. He was so correct, and sort of a Regency dandy in a way. When I came to create a heroine for him - I always have to try to create opposites if I possible can. If I have a hero, I ask myself what the unlikeliest type of woman he would end up with? When I have the answer to that, I have my heroine. So I thought of this great, awkward lump of a girl. I thought if I had her, it had to be a farce. There was no way I could make this serious or it would have been interminably dull.

**LLB:** How would you define what a romance novel is?

**Mary:**

It's hard to define such things. One knows, but it's hard to put it into words. I think most novels have some sort of focus. Like mystery or science fiction, a romance has a focus. In a romance, the focus is the love story. It's right on center stage. Everything else fades in significance around it. A romance has to have a happy ending. When I look back upon my favorite books that were not labelled romance, I always find that the books I really loved and want to re-read always have happy endings. That's one of the main attractions to romance. Writing or reading. You always know that no matter how dreadful things get in the middle, it's going to end happily. You have that lovely relaxed feeling because you know how its going to end.

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**LLB:** Do you sneak a peek?

**Mary:**

If it's a romance, sometimes I do. If it's a mystery, then no. Only if it makes absolutely no difference to the ending. And with a romance, I know it'll have a happy ending, so sometimes I do sneak a peek.

**LLB:** What do you read?

**Mary:**

Very few authors in romance because I don't want to be a derivative writer. I think maybe that's part of the reason people tell me my books are very different from other people's Regencies, because I don't read them. It's not just the plagiarism fear, it's this whole idea of being on a bandwagon. For example, I'm judging a contest right now of series romance and of the 13, eleven are "baby" books. They're driving me crazy. Everybody is writing these baby books. One or two are cute, but when you're on number eleven, oh, gosh - can't they think of something else to write about? Even though it's not conscious, it's too easy to read a book and think you want to write one like that. I want my books to be different. I want them to be *my* books.

Having said that, I would say I read Pamela Morsi - I never miss one of hers. Mary Jo Putney and Jo Beverley. I'd probably read all their books but there are a lot of similarities to my own in the types of heroes and how they approach their stories, so they are no no's in terms of reading them. I don't want to get too close to them. But they are marvelous writers. If I weren't writing myself, I'd read every one of their books. Elizabeth Thornton. I have a lot of writer friends, and I tend to read their books.

And, outside of the genre, I like anything and everything. I read quite a bit of mystery - I find it very relaxing. I like to be hooked when I read, and mystery does that. I re-read a lot of classics. It's very hard to categorize, but I read all the time.

**LLB:** Will you ever venture away from the periods you write in?

**Mary:**

Not in the foreseeable future. I like the eras I write about and feel very much at home in them. I have a lot of readers who love them and I don't really feel the urge to write about other historical eras. Certainly not contemporaries because I've lived 30 years of my life in a small prairie town. I feel a little bit intimidated by the modern age.

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My conversation with Mary was thoroughly enjoyable and I learned a great deal about the creative mind. She is soft-spoken, has a delightful accent, and I wish her great success in her new path with Dell. Her first book on that new contract won't be released until possibly June, 1999 - Dell has chosen to wait until books on her current contracts with Signet and Jove are released.

*Laurie Likes Books*

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