

Flowers of Deception

LAUREN WILLIG SENDS THE PINK CARNATION ON HER FINAL MISSION

By Jennifer Peters

AFTER MORE THAN a decade and a dozen books, Lauren Willig is closing out the Pink Carnation series with one last wild adventure. *The Lure of the Moonflower* (NAL), out this month, follows the series' title heroine as she attempts to save the queen of Portugal — and finally finds her own happily ever after. We caught up with Willig to find out how she feels about bidding adieu to the Pink Carnation, being a genre-defying author and whether she could ever pass muster as a spy.

You've been with the league of the Pink Carnation for quite some time. How does it feel to be wrapping up this series after spending more than a decade with these 19th century spies? “With an auspicious and a drooping eye,” to quote Hamlet. Or, more simply: all the feels, all the feels. The Pink Carnation series has been such a defining part of my life for so long that it's mind-boggling to imagine not having an annual Pink book to write — but I always knew that I wanted to wrap the series up someday so that readers wouldn't be left dangling, and now felt like the time. It's been a good run!

In this last book, we finally get the Pink Carnation's story. Did you always know what her story would be? Jane is such a take-charge heroine; it can't have been easy finding a suitor who would hold his own with the spy extraordinaire. I've never been able to resist a bit of matchmaking. Very early on in the series, I tried to set the Pink Carnation up with some of my existing characters — but it was like *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. One was too earnest; another was too cynical. Where was the hero who was just right?

And then, circa 2006, I saw it: a man, with a battered hat pulled down low over his head, sitting by a campfire in the Portuguese hills. All I knew about him was that he was a soldier of fortune, a turncoat, a renegade and that he looked kind of like Harrison Ford as Han Solo.

Fast forward to 2008. I was writing *The Betrayal of the Blood Lily* (Dutton, '10), which is set in India in 1804. A lot of the book is taken up with people talking about the hero's black sheep brother, Jack, the half-Indian son of a colonel in the Madras cavalry, who, barred from serving in the East India Company's army, ran off and became first a mercenary and later a spy for the French: the Moonflower. I didn't think much of it until the very end of the book, when Jack walked into the scene. And I realized, ack! That's the man at the campfire! Suddenly, Jane's hero was standing right in front of me, and he couldn't be more imperfectly perfect.

What about our modern-day heroine Eloise's story: When did you know how her story would end? As her story went on, were there ever things you considered doing with her that maybe you didn't?



Confession: I didn't know how Eloise's story was going to end until the very last chapter of the penultimate Pink book, *The Mark of the Midnight Manzanilla* (NAL '14), when Colin, the hero, took matters into his own hands and totally changed the plot on me. I've always written Eloise and Colin in real time (which is a more dignified way of saying that I've never had any idea of what they would do until I sat down and wrote it). That being said, I'm thrilled with the way it turned out ... even if it wasn't what I had initially planned!

As for ideas less traveled, I've always wanted to write an Eloise and Colin spinoff novel, either a murder mystery (Bridget Jones meets Agatha Christie, anyone?) or an adventure novel, in which Colin and Eloise would have to go all *Romancing the Stone*, evading Russian mobsters and stumbling down hillsides. Maybe one of these days ...

One of the great things about the series is that, while each book contains a fantastic romance and a wonderful HEA, the spy stories are really exciting. Did you always intend for your books to be sort of genre-defying? Thank you! Funny story: When we were marketing the first book back in 2003, I announced to my agent that it was a Regency romance, just like Julia Quinn. He hemmed and hawed a little and said, “Er ... I don't think you've written what you think you've written.” One month later, my publisher declared that I'd invented a new genre: historical chick lit. They were very excited about this. That is, until chick lit abruptly died, at which point they hastily told me, pretty please, to remember not to call the book chick lit: it was historical fiction. I went on my first book tour and was informed by the mystery community not to be silly; it wasn't romance or chick lit or historical fiction, it was clearly mystery. Within the space of a year, I went through four genres without rewriting a word!

We are what we read. I've always read heavily in mystery and suspense, as well as romance, and that element insinuated itself into the

books. Once I realized that the books were being read as historical mystery, I began to pay more attention to the suspense plot, treating it not just as scaffolding for the romance, but as an equal thread.

How did you come up with the mysteries for the series? You send your spies on some incredible missions, especially Jack and Jane. What comes first when you write: the mystery or the couple? It varies book to book. With some, I stumbled onto a fun historical tidbit I couldn't resist using: like a bunch of rebels blowing up their own headquarters by accident in Ireland in 1803, or Robert Fulton pitching a design for a submarine to Napoleon and then switching sides and going over to England in 1804. Built-in intrigue! In other books, like *The Mischief of the Mistletoe* (Dutton '10), I built the mystery around the characters. But it's always a give-and-take process between the two: The events shape the characters, and the characters, by their choices, drive the plot.

In the writing of all these novels, did you pick up any tradecraft? If you got drafted into the league of the Pink Carnation right now, what sort of spy skills would you bring to the table? Given my utter failure at every gymnastics class ever, I'm guessing that jumping out of windows and swinging on ropes would not be my forte. I've always loved high-level diplomatic intrigue. Overhearing conversations, passing coded notes, whispering behind a fan, dropping delicately phrased misinformation into the right ear ... count me in!

If Jane were to step into a time machine and wind up in 2015, what would she think about our time? And what if Eloise found herself in 1803? Would she, with her obvious fascination with the period, be able to fit in? Jane would be on the Internet in about five seconds flat. Have you seen the British TV show *Sherlock*? As I was writing Jane all these years, I always described her to friends as my Sherlock Holmes character — cool, analytical, musical, mathematical, a good friend in her way, but aloof from the messier emotions. When I saw that first episode of the modern Sherlock, in which he takes to technology like a duck to water, I thought, ha! That would be modern Jane in a nutshell. (Or, more accurately, in an iPhone.)

As for Eloise ... I tend to think the minor annoyances, like the lack of contact lenses and caramel macchiatos, would stymie her. But she would certainly plunge into it with enthusiasm!

What are you working on next? Now that the Pink series is done, I'm hard

at work on my next stand-alone novel: an epic family saga that sweeps from Gilded Age New York to World War II Paris (look for that one in summer 2017!). Although it's a stand-alone, I couldn't resist sneaking in a connection to the Pink books: The heroine is a granddaughter of Gabrielle Jaouen, whom Pink readers will remember from *The Orchid Affair* (Dutton '11). It's been such fun getting to revisit Gabrielle at a much later stage of her life.

I'm also busy with the final proofs for *The Forgotten Room* (NAL), a novel co-written with my two favorite ladies from the end of the alphabet: Beatriz Williams and Karen White. *The Forgotten Room* appears on shelves in January 2016. ✧

For more on Lauren Willig, visit LaurenWillig.com.

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