

A Valentine's Interview with...



Lauren Willig *author of* *The Seduction of the* *Crimson Rose*

Have you ever been given a crimson rose?

I have, a few times, although almost invariably just when I was gearing up to break up with someone. One of my boyfriends, having learned from the mistakes of his predecessors, once gave me a pineapple for Valentine's Day. Unfortunately, he refused to wear it on his head and dance with it.

I know that crimson roses are supposed to be romantic, but I've always found them a little macabre. It might be because I never remember to change the water in the vase and generally leave them there until they turn a creepy purply-black color.

I'd never thought about it before, but that darker connotation of crimson roses definitely crept into this book. There's something both seductive and dangerous about the color crimson, and the velvet texture of the petals is matched by the sharpness of the thorns that guard them—all of which holds true for both my hero and heroine.

How would you define romance?

It's very easy to confuse romance with its trappings, with roses, and heart-shaped boxes of chocolates, and Madame Butterfly playing on the Eiffel Tower at sunset. Not that there's anything wrong with all that (I'm a big fan of those heart-shaped boxes of chocolates), but, fundamentally, all that is mere window dressing. To me, the most poignant and meaningful moments in real life and fiction are those where the pretty trappings have been stripped away and the hero and heroine are forced to confront the bare reality of their feelings for one another, even when it's not convenient and it's not pretty and it doesn't come easy. When Rhett Butler returns to besieged Atlanta to get Scarlett out, or when Darcy whisks off to London to set Lizzy's wayward sister's elopement to rights—that's romantic. A box of chocolates looks pretty paltry next to that, no?

Do you think you have the right seduction know-how?

My boyfriend would tell you that the right seduction know-how consists of being female. (Thanks, dearest.) I believe it has to do with confidence and comfort and to one's own self being true and all those good things. I used to like to tipsily recite poetry to men, but I

wouldn't recommend that as a seduction technique. Oh, and if you are going to recite poetry? Pick something short. Do not attempt to read the entirety of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*. Just trust me on this one.

But I digress. What I was going to say was that seduction is all about the individuals and the circumstances. A pair of wooly pajamas can be more seductive, on the right person, than a strapless, backless dress.

That's definitely the case for the characters in *Crimson Rose*. My heroine, Mary, is a practiced seductress (how else, after all, is a girl meant to get ahead on the marriage market?), used to twisting men around her finger. But when she comes up against Lord Vaughn, as accomplished a flirt as she is, all her usual tricks are blunted; he can see right through her and, frankly, isn't impressed. Their "seduction" scene is a rather counterintuitive one—the usually suave hero is practically incoherent with fever, and my never-a-hair-out-of-place heroine is a disheveled mess. It takes both of these practiced seducers being thrown off balance, losing their accustomed cool, for the seduction to work.

You chose to write historical fiction and romance – do you think we've lost real romance nowadays?

There's certainly something to be said for knee breeches (okay, there's a lot to be said for knee breeches), but I'd say every time period comes with its own trade-offs. The historical world in which I write is one of leisure—I'm convinced this is one of the reasons that nineteenth century aristocrats are such a recurrent theme in romance novels. It's because they actually had time to dwell on romance, to play with it, to make a game of it, while someone else did the washing up. On the other hand, it was a culture in which the primary motivations for marriage were avaricious rather than amorous, something of which the hero and heroine of *Crimson Rose* are very aware. In that sense, our own society, with its deep attachment to the idea of marrying for love, might be the more romantic of the two.

When it comes down to it, the trappings change, and we can all debate about whether we'd rather have knee breeches or flush toilets (sadly, "both" doesn't seem to be a viable answer), but I firmly believe that romance is where you find it, and it can be found in a Norman keep, a Regency house, or even in the midst of the bustle of a modern city.

Your books are not just about bodice-ripping romance – they involve adventure, spies, and intrigue. Would you ever write one without the other?

My books tend to operate on what I think of as the Scarlet Pimpernel Principle: dashing English aristocrats engaged in acts of amateur espionage. Because nothing says fun like thwarting Napoleon Bonaparte? There are a couple of things that drew me to that combo of romance and intrigue. I'm a lapsed historian—I was working on a PhD in history when I started that first *Pink Carnation* book—and the Napoleonic Wars are a veritable treasure trove of historical absurdities. I love being able to link my characters into those quirky historical incidents, and the adventure side of the books lets me do that. It also provides a great framework for the romance, creating pressures and external conflicts that heighten the tension of the growing relationship. So the short answer is... I'm going to continue to

take my romance with a side of espionage and a hearty dollop of intrigue. Ripped bodices optional, but strongly encouraged.

Which character (in first four books) have you most fallen in love with, and why?

It's a toss up between two very different characters. On the one hand, I have a huge soft spot for the hero of the second book, *The Masque of the Black Tulip*. Miles Dorrington is the quintessential bloke. There's just no other way to describe him. He's the guy next door, athletic, slightly clueless (at least when it comes to anything to do with women) and incredibly good-natured, with floppy hair and a thing for ginger biscuits. He's the sort who'll buy you three different boxes of chocolate for Valentine's Day because he can't figure out which one you'll like best, so why not buy the lot? (Of course, he's also the guy who'll be buying them all in a rush, at the corner store, at the last minute, because he forgot it was Valentine's Day until he saw someone else carrying a big heart-shaped box.) But he always comes through in the end.

My other character crush couldn't be more different. Lord Vaughn, the hero of *The Seduction of the Crimson Rose*, is a suave man of the world. Where Miles bounces, Lord Vaughn strolls (or, occasionally, prowls). Forget double entendres; Lord Vaughn speaks in quadruple entendres. Everything about him is rigorously controlled and elegantly crafted, and you just know that there are dark and dangerous depths smoldering beneath that façade of aristocratic ennui. If Miles is Brendan Fraser in *The Mummy*, then Lord Vaughn is Lovelace from Richardson's *Clarissa* (as played by Sean Bean), urbane, dangerous, and impossibly seductive. I have a number of friends who were terribly indignant when I matched Vaughn up with Mary—they all wanted him for themselves!

How will you be spending this Valentine's Day?

Feeling very, very grateful for all the love in my life. Whether I'm in a relationship or out of one, I've always been a big proponent of Valentine's Day. As you can probably tell from my books, I'm a big believer in love in all its forms—families, friendships, romantic love—and I believe they all deserve celebrating. So that will be me in the bright red dress and heart-shaped earrings, raising a glass of pink champagne in a toast to Saint Valentine and his little sidekick in the toga.

Who would be your secret Valentine?

That's a tough one! I have many secret crushes, some more recherché than others. Have we mentioned my Sean Bean thing? I also have a huge crush on Rory Frost from M.M. Kaye's *Trade Wind*. (Come to think of, they were both huge influences on the character of Lord Vaughn. Hmm.) Sean Bean playing Rory Frost... now *that* would totally make my Valentine's Day! BBC folks? Could you get on that, please?

Happy Valentine's Day, all!

***The Seduction of the Crimson Rose* is out now. Previous books in the series include: *The Secret History of the Pink Carnation*, *The Masque of the Black Tulip* and *The Deception of the Emerald Ring*.**