

# Literary Leanings

All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you; the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse, and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was.  
~Ernest Hemingway

## Heyer's Heroines

Word of the Month

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Aspiring Authors

Then and Now

Recommendations

BATH  
TANGLE

GEORGETTE  
HEYER

Literary Leanings  
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# Heyer's Heroines

by Toni Newman

I am constantly amazed to discover that those of my friends and acquaintances who I consider widely read have never heard of Georgette Heyer. And I am—rarely—pleasantly surprised and immensely pleased when I come across someone who knows of her. Indeed, when I discover someone who has “read a Heyer,” I feel a little like Anne of Green Gables—I have found a kindred spirit. And I choose carefully before I recommend Heyer to someone, for not every reader will appreciate the subtlety and genius of a Georgette Heyer novel.

When Georgette Heyer died in 1974, fifty-one books of her books were in print. She had been published in more than ten languages, and had been a consistently best selling author for over half of her life. So how is it that so few people know of her? It is perhaps because she remained, as her biographer Jane Aiken Hodge asserts, an “unacknowledged moralist and stylist extraordinary” for the duration of her life. While most critics of her day praised her work for its unquestioned originality and wit, few recognized her real genius. Heyer herself contributed to this perception, writing to a friend:

I think myself I ought to be shot for writing such nonsense, but it's unquestionably good escapist literature, and I think I should rather like it if I were sitting in an air-raid shelter, or recovering from the flu. Its period detail is good; my husband says it is witty—and without going to these lengths, I will say that it is very good fun.

Heyer was an intensely private person, and according to Hodge, “shy on the surface, but a formidable, positive person underneath, with strong views and a great sense of style...[and she wrote] “romantic syllabub with hard core of realism underneath...in the vein of Congreve and Sheridan.” It is precisely this mix of characteristics, so often represented in Heyer's protagonists, that draws readers to her novels. Readers of Georgette Heyer will instantly recognize the strong views and sense of style represented by Sophy Stanton-Lacy, the hard core of realism found in Annis Wychwood, and the strong views and great sense of style held by Ancilla Trent.

Those not yet acquainted with Sophy, Annis, and Ancilla have a rare treat in store, for these three women are every bit as likeable, as flawed, and as compelling as Austen's Elizabeth Bennett.

There is something remarkable about an author who, though she received scores of fan letters, kept only one. It was, according to Hodge, “from a woman who had kept herself and her cell-mates

sane through twelve years in a Romanian political prison by telling the story of Friday's Child over and over again.” Two things about this anecdote. One, how little did Heyer esteem her fame to keep just this one fan letter. And, two, how much she must have prized what her art did to help those poor souls held in prison for twelve years. Telling, isn't it, that the one fan letter she kept was one that meant life and sanity for the reader? And, in spite of her sometimes denigrating remarks about her work, I think she saw the value in it, even if she was sometimes reluctant to claim it. When the intensely private Georgette Heyer was asked about her life, she invariably replied, “You will find me in my work.” That is hardly the comment of a woman who does not see the value of her work.

At her death, it is heartening to see that Heyer's genius was acknowledged. The Guardian called her “one of the great queens of historical fiction.” The Sunday Telegraph mourned the passing of Heyer as the author “sometimes known as the 20th-century Jane Austen.” And The Times wrote that “she gave her name to a recognizable genre of fiction...Her family and many friends, together with her devoted readers, will be saddened to know that there can never be another Georgette Heyer to delight us.”

While there will never be another Heyer, how completely lucky we are to have her fifty-one novels to relish. And to re-read. And to share. Selectively.





Upon the mountain tops we yearn for  
Silence  
To better hear the screaming nations

From whom we beg  
Silence  
To better hear ourselves

By Genevieve Green

