

## Romance Meets Historical Suspense

By Dorinda Ohnstad

Tasha Alexander's suspense novel, *And Only To Deceive*, debuted in October 2005, and its sequel, *A Poisoned Season*, was released in April 2007. Both books are set in 1890s Victorian England, after the passage of the Women's Property Act—a time when a young woman experiencing an intellectual awakening and striving for a degree of independence had more freedom to do so. The perfect setting for Tasha's protagonist Lady Emily Ashton, a young wealthy widow, strong-willed and feisty, who finds herself pulled into solving complex mysteries involving theft and murder.

Tasha was an English major, with a concentration in medieval studies, at the University of Notre Dame where she focused on history and literature. The training she received in history gave her the tools needed to delve into researching the Victorian period. Studies abroad in London provided her a working knowledge of places, such as the British Museum, that serve as the backdrop for Lady Ashton's investigations. These details bring Victorian England alive for her readers and transport them from promenades in Hyde Park to vibrant ballrooms to the elegant drawing rooms of the time, while at the same time providing a well-paced story of intrigue.

Tasha has dreamed of being a published author since she was a young girl when she would create stories complete with jacket cover and publishing credits. She says writing isn't just a job, it is her passion. As a stay-at-home mom with a three year old son to care for, extended writing time was limited so she wrote in twenty-minute blocks of time. With a daily goal of 2,000 words, she was able to complete her first manuscript in only two months. Proof of her passion.

When she finally sat down to write her first novel, Tasha didn't deliberately intend to produce a novel of suspense. Her plan was to write the sort of book she liked to read—one with a historical setting, lots of intrigue, and unforgettable characters. Her books are character driven, with Victorian society as much a character as Lady Ashton herself. She successfully blends romance with historical mystery while she writes with a strong voice about societal rules that scream to be broken. For historical mystery lovers she is a must read. Once you embark on a Lady Ashton adventure you'll be hooked. Good news though, there are more to come. Tasha tells us that the next one will whisk us away to Vienna in *A Fatal Waltz* due out next year.

### **Q: What inspired you to write a novel?**

**A:** I've wanted to be a writer for as long as I can remember. When I was a little girl, I used to write stories and turn them into books. Books that were very well-received by my parents. But as an adult, I got caught up in the whole earning-a-living thing and stopped writing. One day, when my son was about three and a half, I was reading *Gaudy Night* by Dorothy L. Sayers, and a sentence in the novel jumped out at me: "If you are once sure

what you do want, you find that everything else goes down before it like grass under a roller—all other interests, your own and other people's.”

I closed the book and decided right then and there that I was going to write a novel. For years I'd been saying I wanted to write; now it was time to act.

**Q: When did you begin the process of writing your first book? How long did it take you? What did you find the most challenging?**

**A:** I started work on *And Only to Deceive* in the fall of 2003, right about when my son decided to stop napping—so as you might imagine, my biggest challenge was finding time to work. Stay at home moms know how difficult this can be with a little one underfoot! But it's amazing what you can get done in short bursts. I had the first draft of the book done in about two months.

**Q: Once you had a completed manuscript, what were the steps you had to take to get the book published?**

**A:** I always feel like I should make something up so that the story's more interesting. I was very, very fortunate—I found a literary agent quickly and she sold the book to HarperCollins/William Morrow about two weeks after it went on submission.

**Q: Victorian England circa 1890 is not an unusual setting for a romance novel, but it is for a suspense novel. First, why did you choose this setting? Second, why did you choose the suspense genre over romance?**

**A:** Victorian England has always fascinated me—it's full of all these societal rules that scream to be broken. I wanted to write a story about a young woman coming into her own intellectually and striving for a degree of independence, so I needed to set the book after the Women's Property Act had been passed. The 1890s are a fantastic period—gorgeous clothes, fascinating politics, and a gilded society blithely unaware of its imminent demise.

As for the genre, when I was writing I didn't think in terms of where the book would fit. I focused on writing a story that I would like to read and hoped that a publisher would be able to determine how to categorize it.

**Q: What is your work schedule like? How has it changed since you published your first book?**

**A:** My schedule changed more when my son started school than after my first book was published. He's out of the house from 8am to 4pm, so I've got a marvelously huge swathe of time all to myself Monday through Friday. I start my day by drinking tons of tea while checking email and generally messing around online. After that I get down to work—start by reading over what I wrote the day before and lightly revising it. From there, I shoot for 2000 new words a day.

**Q: Your protagonist, Emily Ashton, is a strong, independent, adventuress and intellectual woman, at a time that society spurned such traits. How much of her personality, drive and desires stem from or mirror your own characteristics?**

**A:** Ah.....I suppose there are bits of me in all my characters, but I can't pretend to be nearly as strong, independent, or adventurous as Emily. And I've never been married to a viscount....

**Q: How many more Lady Emily Ashton adventures do you plan to write?**

**A:** The third in the series, *A Fatal Waltz*, will be published next year, and I will happily write as many as readers are willing to read!

**Q: How much of Emily Ashton's life is planned out in your head? How do you know where you will go with her next?**

**A:** I am not a planner or outliner and find that Emily frequently surprises me. Half the fun of writing the books is seeing what she's going to do. When I embark on a new project I start by deciding on the setting—in the third book, for example, Emily will go to Vienna. From there, I come up with the details of the crime—who did it, how, and most importantly why. Then I do a lot of sitting around looking like I'm not working, trapped in my head until I know how I want the book to open. The first sentence typically comes to me right as I'm falling asleep—and if I still remember it in the morning, I know I'm on the right track and can jump into the writing.

**Q: Your knowledge of Victorian England and ancient Greek and Roman art are evident throughout both of your novels. Where do you research information for your books?**

**A:** I'm a library girl—love checking out enormous heaps of books. I do a lot of reading when I'm casting about for ideas, but try not to overwhelm myself with research. There's a temptation when writing historicals to cram in every fascinating fact you learn about the period—but often that doesn't serve the story. So I tend to write skeletal first drafts and then when I'm revising dip back into the research, seeking out only the specific facts that I need.

**Q: As a fellow fan of Starbucks, I found it interesting to learn that you wrote your second book, *A Poisoned Season*, while ensconced daily in a cushy corner chair at the Five Points Starbucks Coffee Shop. How was this writing environment different from that of your first novel, and how do you think it influenced the development of your novel. Describe your current writing setting.**

**A:** I really liked working in Starbucks—loved the background noise, the interaction with other people (writing can be an awfully isolating endeavor). And the chai is unbeatable. Now I work at home most of the time—I have a lovely office. But while I can work in

my pajamas, the drawback is that there are distractions everywhere: dirty dishes, laundry, the phone, email, etc. etc. I love to cook, so the kitchen calls to me when I should be working.

**Q: What are your long term goals as a writer?**

**A:** I'd love for this series to have a nice, long run—it's wonderful to get to develop characters over more than one book. But I'd also like to do some stand-alones and maybe someday write a contemporary novel. Regardless, my primary goal is to continue to earn my living as an author for as long as I'm capable of typing.

**Q: I am anxious to learn more about the book you have been commissioned to write as a companion book to the forthcoming movie, *The Golden Age, A Novel of Queen Elizabeth*, set to star Cate Blanchett and Clive Owen. How did this all come about? How much freedom do you have in developing the book's plot? How has the process of writing a commissioned book differed from your first two novels?**

**A:** HarperCollins contacted my agent and asked if I'd be interested in the project. They sent me the script, and once I read it I knew I wanted to do it—it's a fantastic story about an amazing woman. The overall plot of the novel had to stick to the screenplay, but I had a lot of freedom when it came to expanding the story—a movie is much shorter than a book, so I added a lot. The process was completely different from my usual one—this time I knew exactly what direction the plot was heading—it was like working with an incredibly detailed outline.

The most difficult part was getting my head around writing something that takes more liberties with history than my Emily novels do. The film is not a documentary—but it does a magnificent job of presenting the characters as they truly were.

The research was more consuming than I'd anticipated—I know a lot about Victorians, very little about Elizabethans—so I couldn't take anything for granted and had to look everything up.

**Q: In addition to your commissioned book, are you working on another manuscript? If so, can you tell us a little bit about it?**

**A:** The third Emily book is in production, so right now I'm starting work on the fourth. Nothing firm yet, but I think it will be set in Constantinople and England. I've figured out who gets murdered, but I don't yet know why...

**Q: I was amazed to find out that you finished your first manuscript in just two months, while being a stay-at-home mother with a young son. How were you able to accomplish this amazing feat, and what advice could you give to other aspiring writers faced with the same family demands?**

**A:** Before I started writing, I had very specific ideas about what circumstances I would need: a room of my own, lots of uninterrupted time, preferably the sun at just the right angle in the sky, planets aligned, the elusive muse sitting across from me. But life doesn't work that way, does it?

Because I was doing something that I desperately wanted to do, I managed in my situation: when you really want something, you'll figure out a way to make it happen. Turns out that you don't need any of the above to write a book—you simply have to free yourself from expectations and seize whatever time you can. If you love what you're doing, you'll get it done.

And I found that writing in short bursts can be really great—when you're interrupted constantly, you stop working mid-sentence. Doesn't sound like a good idea, does it? But actually it's much easier to come back and finish a sentence than to stare at the blank page of a new chapter. I probably wouldn't have ever discovered that if I hadn't started my career the way I did.

To find out more about Tasha Alexander and upcoming appearances in your area, you can check out her website at [www.tashaalexander.com](http://www.tashaalexander.com).