Brontë?s Mistress

by Finola Austin



About the Book

This dazzling debut novel for fans of MRS. POE and LONGBOURN explores the scandalous historical love affair between Branwell Brontë and Lydia Robinson, giving voice to the woman who allegedly corrupted her son?s innocent tutor and brought down the entire Brontë family.

Yorkshire, 1843: Lydia Robinson --- mistress of Thorp Green Hall --- has lost her precious young daughter and her mother within the same year. She returns to her bleak home, grief-stricken and unmoored. With her teenage daughters rebelling, her testy mother-in-law scrutinizing her every move, and her marriage grown cold, Lydia is restless and yearning for something more.

All of that changes with the arrival of her son?s tutor, Branwell Brontë, brother of her daughters? governess, Miss Anne Brontë, and those other writerly sisters, Charlotte and Emily. Branwell has his own demons to contend with --- including living up to the ideals of his intelligent family --- but his presence is a breath of fresh air for Lydia. Handsome, passionate and uninhibited by social conventions, he?s also 25 to her 43. A love of poetry, music and theater bring mistress and tutor together, and Branwell?s colorful tales of his sisters? elaborate play-acting and made-up worlds form the backdrop for seduction.

But Lydia?s new taste of passion comes with consequences. As Branwell?s inner turmoil rises to the surface, his behavior grows erratic and dangerous, and whispers of their passionate relationship spout from her servants? lips, reaching all three protective Brontë sisters. Soon, it falls on Lydia to save not just her reputation, but her way of life, before those clever girls reveal all her secrets in their novels. Unfortunately, she might be too late.

Meticulously researched and deliciously told, BRONTË?S MISTRESS is a captivating reimagining of the scandalous affair that has divided Brontë enthusiasts for generations and an illuminating portrait of a courageous, sharp-witted woman who fights to emerge with her dignity intact.

Discussion Guide

1. On page 51, Lydia Robinson remarks, ?How funny it is that men and women struggle as they die, but few of us kick or scream as we are lowered alive into our tombs.? How would you describe Lydia?s state of mind at the start of BRONTË?S MISTRESS?

2. What is Lydia?s relationship with her daughters like? Why do you think that she is often critical of them? On page 80, she pens, ?Motherhood was about offering truth, not comfort. For all it still tugged at my heartstrings to hear her cry so, Lydia needed to leave behind her childish notions. And I must be the one to disabuse her.? Why does the elder Lydia feel that it?s her duty to do so? Do you agree with her (taking into account the historical context)?

3. Lydia feels strongly about her daughters? marriage prospects and remarks on page 90, ?I would take action and defend them from a woman?s worst fate --- to be extraneous and unneeded.? Given that this is Lydia?s greatest fear, how does this worry drive her actions and affect her decisions throughout the novel? Does she ever become ?extraneous?? Do the Brontës?

4. Women throughout history are often cast as the temptress when they engage in sexual relationships outside of wedlock. What famous examples of this can you think of? How is this portrayed in BRONTË?S MISTRESS? Is more of the burden for the affair put on Lydia than it is on Branwell? Do you believe that Edmund?s emotional distance from Lydia played a role in her affair, and if so, does any of the burden fall on him?

5. A great deal of Lydia?s focus revolves around what is economically safe and savvy for herself and her family. Why do you think she engages in this affair with Branwell, given all the risks to her financial well-being and societal status?

6. On page 136, Lydia says to Anne Brontë, ?You never had your chance.... And, now, look at the life you are forced to lead --- you and your sisters. You must choose between being a drudge or a burden.? Do you think Lydia is being harsh or truthful here? Are we meant to sympathize with her? Did writing novels offer a third alternative path to the Brontë sisters? Do female main characters have to act a certain way for readers to sympathize with them?

7. Why do you think Lydia is so fascinated with Charlotte?

8. How would you characterize Lydia?s relationship with Marshall? Compare Marshall to Lydia's own mother (as we're told) or to Lydia and her daughters' relationship. Do you think there is anything romantic and/or sexual in their connection?

9. Before Lydia travels to Allestree Hall, she says on page 245, ?Sir Edward might be saving me, but I would not abdicate my power. I could not allow myself to make the same mistakes again.? In what way did Lydia abdicate her power in past relationships? How does she work to change that dynamic when she?s with Sir Edward? Do you think she?s successful in keeping her power?

10. Women have more options today than in Victorian times. But do you think there is still undue pressure on women in romantic, sexual or economic relationships? Do some aspects of Lydia?s experience apply to women today?

11. Consider Lydia?s relationship with Dr. Crosby. Why do you think he shares with her the fact that he?s attracted to men? How does their relationship grow over the course of the novel, and how is it unique from any of the other relationships in Lydia?s life?

12. Lydia?s affair with Branwell has been historically characterized as bringing down the entire Bronte? family. Having read this novel, do you believe that to be true? Why do you think this blame has been laid at Lydia?s feet?

13. Did Lydia?s encounter with Charlotte go the way you expected it would? Lydia writes, ?The tears I was choking on now seemed less for Branwell than for his sisters, for the fact that they would always hate me? (page 287). Why do you think Charlotte?s rejection of Lydia affected her so much? Do you think she feels closer to the Bronte? sisters than to Branwell by this point? Why?

14. What do you think of the ending and Lydia?s ?almost overwhelming desire to write a novel of my own. A story about me?? (page 297)? In what ways was her own story told for her in the past? How did her tangential relationship with the Bronte? sisters inspire this? What stories of real women from the past may be lost to us?

Author Bio

Finola Austin, also known as the Secret Victorianist on her award-winning blog, is an England-born, Northern Ireland-raised, Brooklyn-based historical novelist and lover of the 19th century. By day, she works in digital advertising.

Brontë?s Mistress
by Finola Austin

Publication Date: June 22, 2021
Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction
Paperback: 336 pages
Publisher: Atria Books
ISBN-10: 198213724X
ISBN-13: 9781982137243