



QUESTIONS & ANSWERS WITH JEN TURANO



Playing the Part

by Jen Turano

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1. A good portion of *Playing the Part* is set at Ravenwood—a castle that sits high on the Hudson River, owned by Mr. Bram Haverstein. What was the motivation behind using a castle instead of a run-of-the-mill Gilded Age mansion?

Part of the mystery surrounding Mr. Bram Haverstein centers around the idea that he, for reasons unknown, bought an honest-to-goodness castle that's rumored to be haunted. Since Mrs. Abigail Hart—Bram's grandmother and the meddling matchmaker of the series—has always painted her grandson as a bit of a charming dish, having him live in a spooky castle allowed me to create all sorts of delicious conflict, especially between Bram and our heroine, Miss Lucetta Plum—two characters who have more than their fair share of secrets.

I was originally going to have the castle be one that had been purchased from an old Scottish family and disassembled and shipped to America. At that time, I was intending to have the ghost story revolve around the idea that due to the disassembling, someone wasn't very pleased with the situation and had traveled, along with the disassembled pieces of stones, all the way to America in order to haunt the person responsible for the displacement of the castle. That idea, however, became far too complicated as I went about writing the first draft, which is why I then decided to model the castle after Lyndhurst, a real castle owned by Mr. Jay Gould. Lyndhurst was built in a classic gothic style, which perfectly suited my idea of where Bram needed to live.

2. Speaking of the castle, was there a reason you added a dungeon, along with a wide variety of torture devices?

Well, as to that, why write about a castle at all if there's no dungeon? And, as for the torture devices . . . I could divulge the reasoning behind adding those, but then I'd have to use the devices on you and . . . it might be better for everyone to just read the book.

3. In *Playing the Part*, you've once again included some rather interesting characters. Tell us about Geoffrey . . . the goat.

Interestingly enough, Geoffrey was not in my first draft of *Playing the Part*, nor was he in the second, third, or even fourth draft. He didn't show up until I was doing a revision and couldn't for the life of me figure out how to fix a particular chapter. There I was, lying on my office floor, staring at a ceiling that's painted a rather boring shade of white, bemoaning the fact that I was evidently washed up as a writer since I didn't seem to have a single clever thought left in my head. Then, out of nowhere, right as I was contemplating what other options I might have available to me if I wasn't a writer, a goat suddenly galloped through my mind, causing mayhem with every gallop. Well, needless to say, that was it—I was back in business. I gave the goat the charming name of Geoffrey and he gave me the perfect way to fix that pesky chapter. There's just something about a goat gallivanting in and out of chapters. . . .

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4. Miss Lucetta Plum becomes somewhat annoyed when she discovers that Mr. Bram Haverstein, the oh-so-dashing hero of the story, has suffered from a small touch of infatuation with Lucetta for years. Wouldn't one believe that most ladies would enjoy learning of a gentleman's heart-felt affection?

Miss Lucetta Plum is not most ladies. She was born with extraordinary looks, and because of those looks, gentlemen have always been quick to announce their affection for her, even when they have no idea who the lady truly is behind those extraordinary looks. Lucetta does not care at all about her unusual beauty, spending little time when she's at her leisure dressed in what anyone could call a fashionable manner. What she really longs for in a gentleman, even though she makes the claim numerous times that she's sworn off gentlemen for the foreseeable future, is a man who will see past the beauty of her face to the flawed woman beneath that face, and yet will appreciate that woman all the same.

5. You've brought Mr. Silas Ruff, the villain from *After a Fashion* back to torment Miss Lucetta Plum in *Playing the Part*. He's such a complete scoundrel that it makes one wonder if he was actually inspired by someone.

Mr. Silas Ruff is, indeed, a most horrid gentleman, and his character was based very loosely on Mr. Stanford White, a renowned architect of the Gilded Age, but a man who was, in my humble opinion, despicable. I first started seeing his name pop up in research when I was looking into different styles of buildings in New York City. He was responsible for creating Madison Square Garden, a masterpiece of architecture, but the very place where Stanford was murdered in cold blood. Murder always gets me curious, so I dug a little deeper into Mr. White's life, and that's when I discovered the abuse he perpetuated on a young girl by the name of Evelyn Nesbit. She was a mere child when he became associated with her, and I won't go into the details, but he could have very well deserved the end that he met. What I found almost as interesting as his murder, though, was that even though he was a reprobate, he was still invited into high society, and that's how I came up with the idea for Silas Ruff – a repulsive gentleman who strolls about within the hallowed confines of society even though it's known he's a rather questionable sort.

6. What was the most interesting historical fact you discovered while writing this book?

It's more disturbing than interesting, but Washington Square Park, where Mrs. Abigail Hart resides in her completely proper brownstone, lies on top of thousands of bodies. That area of New York City was once a potter's field, but when someone decided it would make a lovely spot for the military to practice their drills on, instead of relocating the bodies, they were simply buried and landscaped over. Houses were eventually built on top of some of those bodies, and that's where the bodies remain to this very day.