

The Governess of Highland Hall by Carrie Turansky

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

1. Welcome Carrie Turansky, author of *The Governess of Highland Hall*. What inspired you to set your story in Edwardian England (1911)?

When I watched the British TV series “Downton Abbey,” I became interested in life in England during the Edwardian Era, especially life on a country estate where there were not only aristocratic family members, but also many loyal and hardworking servants. A good friend and fellow author, Cathy Gohlke, wrote a beautiful book set in England during this same time period, *Promise Me This*, and that also piqued my interest in the period.

When I attended the American Library Association Convention in Philadelphia in 2012, I had a discussion with an editor about the success of “Downton Abbey,” and she encouraged me to create a story with a heroine who was a governess and set it in England on an estate like Downton. That got my mental wheels turning. But I was hesitant to follow up on the idea at first because I knew it would take a lot of research to create a story that rang true for that period. But Cathy encouraged me and loaded me up with research books. I am so glad she did, because I loved writing a novel set in England during that time period.

2. Your book features the fictional Highland Hall. Was this grand estate influenced by any real life British estates?

As I was writing about Highland Hall I was picturing two famous British estates, Highclere Castle where “Downton Abbey” is filmed and Tyntesfield, another beautiful estate, which is in Somerset, England. I found Tyntesfield through my online research for the series, and I fell in love with it after I watched a documentary about its history. There are many photos of Tyntesfield online, and that is the manor house pictured on the cover of *The Governess of Highland Hall*. It’s now owned by the British National Trust, and is open to visitors. I hope to visit there next spring.

3. You recently traveled to Britain and visited several places that inspired “The Edwardian Brides Series.” Can you share a few highlights from your trip?

Yes, last summer my husband and I took a wonderful trip to England. We rented a car and he drove over 400 miles on the wrong side of the road, seated in the wrong side of the car. He is an amazing man! We landed in London, then toured the Oxford area and visited Highclere Castle and gardens where “Downton Abbey” is filmed. That was one of the highlights of the trip for me. We also toured the Cotswolds that has several farms and lovely little villages that look very much like they did 100 years ago. We ended our time in England up in the Peak District where we visited Chatsworth which is an amazing estate with a very large and elaborate house and gardens. It was used as Mr. Darcy’s home in the latest version of “Pride and Prejudice.” We also attended a country fair on the ground of Chatsworth. We learned that an English country fair is very different than our American version. A English country fair is focused on country life: hunting, horses, fishing, dogs, and more dogs! It was a lot

of fun and we really felt like we had a true taste of England that day. All of these travels gave us some wonderful memories, and they were a great inspiration for my books.

4.As fans of the popular BBC show “Downton Abbey” know, there is a prominent divide between the upstairs family and the downstairs help. Where does the main character, Julia Foster, fit in to this hierarchy as a governess?

A governess had a unique position. She was usually an educated, respected woman from a middle-class or upper class family, but she was still a paid member of the staff and considered below the family. She reported to the housekeeper, but she was above the other female staff. She usually ate her meals with the children in the nursery, so she didn't spend very much time with the rest of the staff. In *The Governess* of Highland Hall, Julia Foster became close friends with Sarah Ramsey, the sister of William Ramsey, who is the master of Highland and hero in the story. But she is also close friends with Ann the nursery maid, so we see her connected to those upstairs and those below stairs.

5.Julia Foster was a missionary in India before her family returns to England because of illness. Was her character inspired by a real life missionary?

The character Julia was inspired by Amy Carmichael, who was a missionary to India in the early 1900s. I'd read Amy's biography, *A Chance to Die*, a few years ago, and when I wanted to write a book set in England in the early 1900s, I remembered Amy's story and took it down from my bookshelf to read again. I wanted to understand the mindset of Christians at that time and learn what prompted her to go to India and spend her life there. Amy's true life experiences provided a rich background for my heroine, and I enjoyed bringing some of the elements of Amy's faith and character into my story.

6.Sir William Ramsey, the widowed master of Highland Hall, is consumed with saving the estate from financial ruin. Was this a common problem during this time period? What did the English see as the solution to the problem?

There were many changes taking place in England in the late 1800s and early 1900s. An agricultural depression placed a financial strain on many large estates. Wages for servants were increasing. When death duties were introduced and then expanded, the financial pressure on aristocratic families increased. Death duties were a type of inheritance tax, and when the master of an estate died and passed it on to the next generation, the new owner was sometimes unable to pay the duties. Some aristocrats sold their paintings, antiques, and valuables to raise the funds. Some married into wealth to save their estates. But for some there was no solution, and their estate had to be sold. In some cases the houses were knocked down, and Britain lost some of its most impressive historic homes.

7.Julia and William are both guarding secrets, which creates a bond between them that is hard to ignore. How do these two navigate the divide between the aristocracy and the servants?

The divide between William and Julia is very evident at the beginning of the story, and William resents Julia questioning him about his lack of time with and affection for his children. But as he gets to know her and comes to admire her faith, character and pure heart, the walls between them begin to come

down. She becomes his friend and confidant, helping him navigate the struggles he faces in his family and in running the estate.

8.What can readers expect from the next book in the series?

Book 2 is tentatively titled *The Daughter of Highland Hall*, and it continues the story of the Ramsey family. The young cousin, Katherine, from book one, becomes the heroine in book two. The year is 1912, and eighteen-year-old Katherine goes to London for her debut in society. She hopes to meet and marrying the “right” young man, but her goals and dreams change as she gets to know a handsome and dedicated medical student who is intent on caring for the poor in London’s East End. That book comes out in the Fall 2014.