

Midmonth BookNotes

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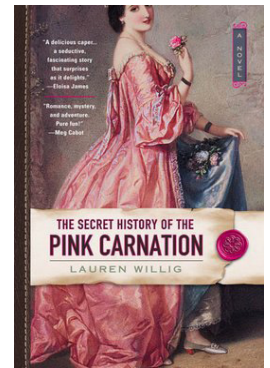
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Blooming August

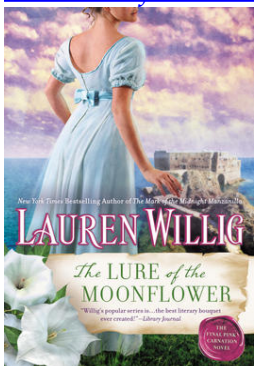
It is never easy saying goodbye to a favorite series, but it is especially difficult to bid adieux to Lauren Willig's Pink Carnation books. Published in 2005, [*The Secret History of the Pink Carnation*](#) launched the literary adventures of a group of florally named English spies fighting to keep Napoleon from taking over Europe. Inspired by *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (especially the Anthony Andrews television miniseries that debuted in 1982), Willig began writing *The Secret History of the Pink Carnation* "as a means of dissertation avoidance right after I passed my General exams back in 2001." Willig wrapped up her "novel writing" project in the spring of 2003 after spending a year researching various historical topics in England. A friend handed the manuscript to an agent, who in turn sold the book to Penguin and the rest is history.



The book opens with American graduate student Eloise Kelly leaving for England to research the *Scarlet Pimpernel* and the *Purple Gentian* for her dissertation. In the process, Eloise discovers historical evidence of the most elusive spy of them all: the Pink Carnation. While sorting out the real identity of this infamous spy, Eloise stumbles across a real life hero of her own: Englishman Colin Selwick, whose family has their own special connection to the flowery spy ring.

Because Willig never initially set out to write a series when she finished *The Secret History of the Pink Carnation*, connecting the dots between the books has, at times, required some creative literary footwork on her part. But the benefit for Willig is that she really enjoyed stumbling across new plotlines and characters that she might not otherwise have imagined if she took a more linear approach to writing the series. Over the course of the dozen novels in the series, Willig has taken readers to England, France, India, and the Iberian Peninsula as the Pink Carnation and her associates do their best to help Great Britain win the war against Napoleon.

[*The Lure of the Moonflower*](#), the last book in the series, wraps things up as Eloise and Colin prepare for their wedding in the present day while back in 1807, the Pink Carnation is in French occupied Portugal trying to find the missing, mad Queen Maria before the French can put their hands on her. The only assistance the Pink Carnation can expect on her mission is from her contact in Portugal: "The Moonflower" a.k.a. Jack Reid. Brimming with witty banter, high-stakes adventure, an expertly evoked historical setting, and just the right dash of swoon-worthy romance, *The Lure of the Moonflower* is a superb ending to a truly remarkable series. The always delightful Willig will be here at the Poisoned Pen on September 8th to sign and discuss her latest Pink Carnation title as well as her most recent standalone historical novel *The Other Daughter* (see below) so mark your calendars now.



Alexandra, Belinda. [The Golden Earrings](#)

(Gallery, 16.00)

Paloma Batton dreams of one day dancing in the Paris Opera Ballet, but a chance meeting with a gypsy woman and a mysterious pair of golden earrings push Paloma into exploring her own heritage in the form of flamenco lessons. In the process, Paloma becomes fascinated with the story of *La Rusa*, a woman who rose from poverty to become one of the most famous flamenco dancers of all time before committing suicide. Or was *La Rusa* murdered? Barbara was enchanted with this book's mix of history, mystery and romance, and recommends it to fans of Kate Morton.

Bowen, Kelly. [You're the Earl that I Want](#)

(Forever, 7.99)

Heath Hextall, the newly minted Earl of Boden, needs a wife to run his household. Independently minded and free-spirited Josephine "Joss" Somerhall has no intention of "applying" for the position. However, when the two of them become tangled up in a plot by French spies to locate a long-lost horde of gold for Napoleon, all bets are now off. Bowen is a shining new star in the historical romance subgenre and I have loved all of her books including *I've Got My Duke to Keep Me Warm* and *A Good Rogue Is Hard to Find*. If you enjoy the intrigue-laced historical storylines in Lauren Willig's Pink Carnation books, you might want to give Bowen a whirl.

Cameron, Cate. [Just a Summer Fling](#)

(Berkley, 7.99)

All Hollywood movie star Ashley Carlsen wants to do while vacationing in Lake Sullivan, VT, is forget about her career and man troubles. A fling with local handyman Josh Sullivan would be just the ticket, but for some reason Josh seems surprisingly indifferent to her romantic overtures despite his reputation as the town's "player." This sexy contemporary romance is the perfect accessory for beach bags everywhere.

Carr, Robyn. [Wildest Dreams](#)

(MIRA, 8.99)

In the latest "Thunder Point" book, professional triathlete Blake Smiley needs a new place to live, where he can focus on training for his next race without any distractions. Blake thinks he has found the perfect new home in Thunder Point

until he meets single mom and nurse Lin Su Simmons and finds his structured world turned upside down.

Castle, Jayne. [Siren's Call](#)

(Jove, 7.99)

Ella Morgan has a unique talent: she can kill a man with her voice. But the last thing Ella wants is for anyone to discover that she is a "siren." So when Rafe Coppersmith tries to hire her to help him with a special project his company is involved on Rainshadow Island, Ella is inclined to turn Rafe down flat. However, once Ella realizes Rafe is the one man, who doesn't seem intimidated by her unique gift, she begins to rethink his idea of working together. Castle is the pseudonym *New York Times* best-selling Jayne Ann Krentz uses for her futuristic flavored romantic suspense.

Clayton, Meg Waite. [The Race for Paris](#)

(Harper, 25.99)

Both photographer Liv Harper and newspaper journalist Jane Tyler know that news reporting is still considered to be a "man's job," but both are determined to break through the glass ceiling that exists in the press corps at the time. Liv figures that if she can get to Paris before any other reporter does and document the arrival of the Allied Forces, she will finally be taken seriously. Liv convinces Jane to join her on the strictly unauthorized journey, and together the women set out for Paris. Along the way they pickup English photojournalist Fletcher Roebuck, whose dashing presence adds some interesting romantic complications to what is turning out to be a truly dangerous mission. Clayton's latest meticulously crafted novel will captivate you with its strong female protagonists, and the fascinating real historical details the author deftly weaves into the plot. If you loved Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale* (and, really who of us who read it didn't?) or you enjoyed Francine Mathew's *The Alibi Club* or *Jack 1939* or you just like well-written historical fiction with plenty of drama and danger, don't miss *The Race for Paris*.

Coriell, Shelley. [The Blind](#)

(Forever, 7.99)

Bomb and weapons specialist Evie Jimenez doesn't always play by the rules, but she always gets her man. So when the citizens of Los Angeles

find themselves at the mercy of a serial killer known as the “Angel Bomber,” Evie is the one person LA billionaire businessman Jack Elliott wants on the case. So far three different women have been selected by the Angel Bomber as the subject of his artistic “masterpieces,” but if Evie has anything to say about it, the Angel Bomber isn’t going to have a fourth exhibit. The only problem is that in order to find the killer before the clock runs out, Evie must first find a way to work closely with Jack without either of them killing each other. *The Blind* is the latest in local author Shelley Coriell’s “The Apostle” series, and it is another white-knuckle, stay-up-late-past-your-bedtime read. If you enjoy television series like *Criminal Minds* or love suspense novels by authors like Allison Brennan or Lisa Gardner, don’t miss this truly terrific romantic suspense novel. The earlier two books in the series are *The Broken* and *The Buried* and they are just as good!

Dare, Tessa. [When a Scot Ties the Knot](#) (Avon, 7.99)

In order to escape the matchmaking plans of her new stepmother, Maddie Gracechurch invents a fiancé for herself in the person of Captain Logan MacKenzie. Then for nearly a decade, Maddie dutifully sends letters to her beloved Captain Logan, before giving him a hero’s death in battle. However, now just as Maddie is comfortably settled into her spinsterish life in Lannair Castle, who should suddenly turn up but one very real -and very angry- Captain Logan MacKenzie! Dare’s books are known and loved for their irresistible combination of sharp wit and sexy romance. I especially enjoyed the humorous letters Maddie writes to Logan that set up the story as well as the lobster (yes, you heard right: lobster) love story that is neatly threaded through the plot.

Delinsky, Barbara. [Blueprints](#) (St. Martin’s, 26.99)

Caroline McAfee isn’t just Jamie’s mother, she is her best friend to boot, and Jamie loves working on their popular local home renovation show *GutIt!* with her mom. However, when the show’s producers decide they want to replace Caroline

as the host with Jamie in order to draw a younger audience, Jamie doesn’t know what to do. As Jamie tries to repair relations with her mom as well as deal with her fiancé, who is pressing her to set a wedding date, a tragic accident forces Jamie to re-examine her life in order to determine what is really important. Delinsky has been writing first-rate women’s fiction for years (I would say how many years exactly except that would date both her and me!), but she hasn’t lost her touch at all when it comes to creating engaging characters and an emotionally compelling plot.

Diaz, Lena. [Exit Strategy](#) (Avon, 5.99)
Sabrina Hightower returns home to North Carolina to look into the mysterious deaths of her brother and her parents (as well as her grandfather’s disappearance), but before she can even begin her investigation, she is kidnapped by sexy assassin Mason Hunt. Don’t think too much about the plot in Diaz’s latest romantic thriller, but just let the high testosterone action and abundance of smoldering sensuality carry you away.

Gregory, Philippa. [The Taming of the Queen](#) (Tor, 27.99)

Gregory, who hit the literary jackpot with her novel *The Other Boleyn Girl*, now turns her attention to Henry VIII’s last queen Kateryn (Catherine) Parr. Although she loves Thomas Seymour (the brother of Queen Jane, Henry’s third wife) widowed Kateryn is commanded to court by the King, who pretty much makes his intentions clear to her right away: marry him or start planning your funeral. While Kateryn definitely doesn’t love Henry, she tries her best to fill her days by advancing her own causes such as religious reform (Kateryn was a serious scholar and the first woman to publish in English). Gregory’s latest vividly written historical is filled with plenty of danger and drama, as Kateryn tries to walk a matrimonial tightrope between pleasing the increasingly mercurial Henry and avoiding losing her head for advocating her religious beliefs.

Hoffman, Alice. [Marriage of Opposites](#) (Simon Schuster, 27.95 SIGNED)

On the island of St. Thomas, headstrong Rachel Pomie puts away her own dreams of someday moving to Paris when she is married off by her parents to Isaac Petit, a widower with three children. After her husband's death, Rachel engages in a scandalous affair with his nephew, who comes to the island to oversee the family business. The product of this affair is a son: Camille Pissarro, who becomes one of the leading lights of French Impressionism. Hoffman's latest lyrically written novel is another intoxicating blend of magical realism and emotionally engaging storytelling that has been racking up an impressive number of starred reviews and is guaranteed to enchant the author's legions of fans. The Poisoned Pen has a very limited number of signed copies of this remarkable novel while supplies last.

Huber, Anna Lee. [A Study in Death](#) (Berkley, 25.95)

They say the couple that sleuths together, stays together. While Anna Lee Huber's "Lady Darby" books are more historical mystery than love story, there is a strong enough thread of romance running through the series as the widowed Kiera Darby finds herself forging both a professional and personal relationship with inquiry agent Sebastian Gage that allows me to mention them here. By *A Study in Death*, the two have become engaged and often work together even when it threatens their new found romantic status as is the case here. Kiera has been hired to paint the portrait of Lady Clare Drummond, but every time Kiera arrives at Clare's home for a sitting, she comes away with the strong impression that her husband Lord Drummond may be taking out his anger both verbally and physically on his wife. So when Clare is found dead, Kiera wonders if it was really an accident or if it might have been murder? Huber does an exceptional job evoking the series early 19th century Scottish setting as well as creating a memorable cast of characters including the irrepressible Kiera. If you enjoy historical mysteries with sleuthing couples such as the Charlotte and Thomas Pitt series by Anne Perry or Deanna Raybourn's Lady Julia Grey mysteries, this is cut from the

same literary cloth. The earlier books in Huber's series include *The Anatomist's Wife*, *Mortal Arts*, and *A Grave Matter*.

Jeffries, Sabrina. [The Art of Sinning](#) (Pocket, 7.99)

Lady Yvette Barlow agrees to be the subject of American artist Jeremy Keane's latest painting if he will agree to help her gain access to some of London's most notorious brothels in order to track down a missing woman and solve a family mystery.

Kleypas, Lisa. [Brown-Eyed Girl](#) (St. Martin's, 25.99)

Avery Crosslin's own fiancé broke up with her right before their wedding ceremony, but Avery hasn't let being left at the altar affect the way she handles her client's weddings one bit. Avery still believes in happily-ever-afters; just not for herself. However when Joe Travis bumps into Avery at a friend's wedding, he immediately falls hard and fast for her. Now all Joe has to do is figure out a way to get Avery to give love one more chance. Kleypas has written some excellent historical and contemporary romances, and she always delivers a solid love story. *Brown-Eyed Girl* is the final installment in her Travis family series.

Lowell, Elizabeth. [Perfect Touch](#) (William Morrow, 26.99)

Art dealer Sara Medina grew up on a dairy farm, so she knows how tough country living can be. Sara has no intention to returning to her country roots permanently but for the opportunity to handle a cache of undiscovered paintings by Armstrong "Custer" Harris, Sara is certainly willing to book a brief trip to the wilds of Wyoming to work with the painting's new owner: Captain Jay Vermillion. Returning home from Afghanistan, Jay is trying to restore his family's working ranch, and selling some of the now valuable Custer works would go a long way to help. However, someone else doesn't want Sara to get her hands on the works of art, and they will do almost anything to send her packing. Lowell, who has also written as A.E. Maxwell and Anne Maxwell, serves up a briskly-paced contemporary romantic suspense novel with a

nice balance between danger and desire that is also notable for its strongly etched western setting. If you like Nora Roberts' romantic suspense novels and haven't yet discovered Lowell, give her a try.

McLain, Paula. [Circling the Sun](#) (Ballantine, 28.00 SIGNED)

Beryl Markham loved three things: fast horses, fast cars and fast airplanes. Well, technically Beryl loved four things if you count Dennis Finch Hatton (who was kind of fast in his own way). In McLain's latest elegantly written historical novel, she explores the fascinating life of Beryl Markham, who lived and loved in Africa in the early 20th century. Beryl's father moved his family from England to Africa in 1904, but Beryl's mother left their farm in Njoro (the British East African Protectorate later to become Kenya) after less than a year with Beryl's brother to return home to England. So for the early years of Beryl's life it was just her and her horse trainer father as well as members of the local Kipsigis tribe, who looked after the young English girl as one of their own. Beryl's unconventional upbringing definitely influenced her later years as she went on to become the first female granted a horse-trainer's license in Kenya as well as record-setting aviator. Throughout the course of her tumultuous life, Beryl survives a disastrous first marriage, a period of homelessness, and a complicated friendship with coffee plantation owner and writer Karen Blixen (a.k.a. Isak Dinesen), with whom she shared an ill-fated love triangle with famed big game hunter Hatton. McLain gained fame with her first book, the best-seller *The Paris Wife*, and *Circling the Sun* is another evocatively told, richly imaged tale about a truly remarkable woman. The Poisoned Pen has a limited number of signed copies of this unforgettable historical novel are available while supplies last.

Phillips, Susan Elizabeth. [Heroes Are My Weakness](#) (Avon, 7.99)

The last person on earth Annie Hewitt wants to see when she returns to Peregrine Island after leaving home as teen more than a decade ago is Theo Harp. So of course, who is the first person Annie bumps into but Theo. Annie thought

Theo loved her when they were both teens, but then he tried to murder her, which Annie took to mean "I think I am really over you." So now all Annie wants to do is find the legacy left to her by her late mother and then get the heck off the island. However, from the look in Theo's eyes, Annie is pretty sure the only way she is getting away is over his dead body. If you missed this terrific contemporary romance when it appeared in hardcover, now is your chance to snap it up in paperback. Phillips has a wonderfully distinctive literary voice as well as a sharp sense of humor. I especially enjoyed the scene where the heroine uses her ventriloquism skills to throw a scare into the hero as well as the way the author puts her own clever contemporary spin on those classic gothic novels of the 1960s and 1970s by authors like Phyllis A. Whitney and Victoria Holt.

Raybourn, Deanna. [A Curious Beginning](#) (NAL, 25.95 SIGNED)

Veronica Speedwell is not the typical Victorian spinster. After the funeral of her last aunt, Veronica is all set to resume traveling the globe in search of rare butterflies. However, upon returning home to Wren Cottage after the funeral, Veronica interrupts an intruder, who attempts to drag Veronica off to his carriage. Fortunately, an elderly stranger arrives on the scene and helps drive the intruder away. The stranger turns out to be Baron Maximilian von Stauffenbach, who not only insists Veronica is in danger, but also informs her he knew her mother. Before the Baron will reveal anything to Veronica about the mother she never knew, he insists on whisking her off to London to stay with reclusive (and cranky) natural historian Revelstoke "Stoker" Templeton-Vane. When the Baron winds up murdered shortly thereafter, the police zero in on Stoker as the killer leaving Veronica with no option but to team up with Stoker if the real killer is to be caught. Raybourn wrote the wonderful Lady Julia Grey historical mysteries as well as several superb standalone historical romances, and with *A Curious Beginning*, she debuts a smashing new series. Veronica has a wonderfully acerbic sense of wit, and watching her interact with Stoker may remind some readers of Elizabeth Peters' Amelia Peabody mysteries. Raybourn will be at the Poisoned Pen on September 8th with Lauren

Willig for the launch of the sleuthing adventures of an irrepressible, irresistible new heroine.

Robards, Karen. [The Last Time I Saw Her](#) (Random, 26.00)

Dr. Charlotte Stone sees dead people, which comes in handy ever since Charlotte started working as an advisor on crime cases for the FBI. When Charlotte finds herself falling for a seductive ghost named Michael Garland, who it turns out is not only a convicted killer but is now in danger from some other really bad guys in the other world, things really start to heat up. Robards has written some really excellent romantic suspense novels like *Walking After Midnight*, but I am not sure even she can pull off this mix of spooky supernatural and sexy suspense. Still, it might be interesting, especially if you are a fan of other authors who like to mix genres up like Kay Hooper.

Roberts, Sheila. [A Wedding on Primrose Street](#) (MIRA, 7.99)

“Mother-daughter relationships were a complicated mixture of love, loyalty, irritation, and resentment, and there was nothing like a wedding to stir the plot.” This quote from *A Wedding on Primrose Street* pretty much distills the essence of the latest addition to Robert’s “Life in Icicle Falls” series as two different mother-daughter groups struggle to survive the emotional ups and downs of planning the perfect wedding. As a wedding planner herself, Anne Richardson has seen her share of momzillas (out of control mother-of-the-brides). So Anne swears to herself that when her own daughter Laney gets hitched, she will not try and take control of the event. Of course, in Anne’s mind, convincing Laney to have her big day at Primrose Haus in Icicle Falls isn’t hijacking the wedding, it simply trying to give Laney the perfect setting for a perfect wedding. As the owner of Primrose Haus, Roberta Gilbert has handled hundreds of wedding parties with nary a tear shed, and she is certain that the Richardson wedding will be yet another success. Of course, that is before Robert’s recently divorced daughter Daphne shows up in Icicle Falls with no place to go and with the idea that she can now “help” her mother with her wedding business. If you love Debbie Macomber’s

“Rose Harbor” or “Blossom Street” books and you haven’t yet discovered Sheila Roberts equally charming books, you are in for a treat.

Willig, Lauren. [The Other Daughter](#) (St. Martins, 25.99 SIGNED)

Rachel Woodley is too late. The minute she got the telegram informing her that her mother was deathly ill, Rachel dropped everything – including working for her current employer the Comte de Brillac– to rush from France back to England. But by the time Rachel arrived in Netherwell, her mother had already passed away. When Rachel begins the sad duty of going through her late mother’s possessions, she is shocked to find a page torn out from *The Tattler* (a high society gossip magazine akin to the *People* magazine of its day) with a photograph of her father and another young woman listed as his daughter. As far as Rachel knows, her father was botanist Edward Woodley, who died when she was a young girl. When Rachel tries to clear matters up by meeting with her only family relative Cousin David, she receives yet another shock. The photo in the magazine is the real deal, and everything Rachel thought she knew about her father is based on a lie. In *The Other Daughter*, Willig brilliantly conjures up the era of the “Bright Young Things” in Britain during the 1920s with her judicious use of spot-on historical details and the cameo appearances in the book of real-life historical figures. Throw in Willig’s delightfully tart sense of wit, and you have a knockout story that will absolutely delight any reader, who enjoys expertly crafted historical fiction with a strong romantic thread to the plot.

Return of a Classic

Despite the apparent lack of romance in the Perry Mason books (unless you are willing to count the unrequited flirting going on between Della Street and her boss Perry), I can't resist including this in the *BookNotes*.

Long before Scott Turow and John Grisham were cooking up plots involving crime and courtrooms, there was Erle Stanley Gardner. From 1933 to 1970, Gardner wrote 82 novels featuring Perry Mason, a lawyer, who would do anything to win a case for his client. The first Perry Mason novel, [*The Case of the Velvet Claws*](#), was published in 1933 and sold twenty-eight million copies in just fifteen years. At the height of Gardner's career the Perry Mason novels were selling at the rate of twenty thousand copies a day making the author one of the wealthiest mystery writers of all time. Now after being unavailable for a number of years, the American Bar Association (naturally) is bringing the Perry Mason mysteries back into print beginning with [*The Case of the Velvet Claws*](#), [*The Case of the Sulky Girl*](#), [*The Case of the Lucky Legs*](#), [*The Case of the Howling Dog*](#), [*The Case of the Curious Bride*](#), and [*The Case of the Counterfeit Eye*](#). Each month a new Mason title will be reprinted, but right now you can order any or all of the first six titles from the Poisoned Pen. While it is certainly true that Gardner will definitely not win any literary awards for his no-frills writing style and concise characterization, the books' crackerjack plotting, rat-a-tat-tat pacing, and the inevitable courtroom showdown between Mason and his opponent (in later books the insufferable District Attorney Hamilton Burger) haven't lost any of their power to keep readers happily turning pages. If you miss those old-school detective stories that focus more on puzzling plots and less on offering up endless details about a sleuth's personal relationships, hobbies, and exercise regimes, the Perry Mason mysteries may be just the blast from the past for which you have been searching.

