

## WHAT IS REGENCY?

By Blair Bancroft

*Special Note:* After Signet and Zebra shut down their traditional Regency lines, I considered scrapping this article, but fortunately trades are showing signs of struggling back to life due to the devotion of authors, readers, small presses, and e-publishers. And, besides, I love the Regency era enough that I'm reluctant to turn my back on the wit and style of Jane Austen, who started it all, or Georgette Heyer, who began the modern revival of what we call "Regency."

Interestingly, what most of us love about these primarily squeaky clean peeks into Britain at the time of Napoleonic wars is exactly what killed them—an emphasis on style, language, and customs of the times, as opposed to the high drama and hot sex of many Regency-set Historicals. So below is my original essay on "What is Regency," with only a minor update here and there. Hopefully, it will still be helpful to authors attempting to understand why writing in the honored tradition of Jane Austen and Georgette Heyer is not going to get you a New York publisher in this first decade of the twenty-first century.

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Having been a Regency buff for more years than I care to remember, it was something of a shock to discover my much beloved genre had become the latest rage in Historical Romance. Will it last, or will it bleed to death from some of the massacres perpetrated by authors who may not even know what the "Regency" is, let alone its style, language, clothing, and customs. Hopefully, I can sort the wheat from the chaff and make some sense out of a time period that tends to explode in some writers' faces. (And send knowledgeable readers into an apoplexy!)

The Regency is a loose term for early nineteenth century Britain, with most of the action customarily confined to England. [Although when my editor told me she would like to see more varied settings for traditional Regencies, as long as the main characters were English, I promptly set a good portion of *The Harem Bride* in

Constantinople! (Signet, July 2004).] Technically, “the Regency” is the time when King George III became so incapacitated that his eldest son legally assumed his role (1811-1820). But the enormous threat of Napoleon Bonaparte and the striking changes in dress and attitudes of that era began years before, around the turn of the century.

Since the word “Napoleonic Era” makes people think of battles instead of romance, I suspect the term “Regency” was “borrowed” by American publishers to give the era a more romantic cachet. To the British, the years from 1795 until the death of George IV (1830), and even into the short reign of King William, are considered late Georgian. Only with the ascension of George IV’s niece, Victoria, to the throne (1837) did the freer ways of the Regency truly fall by the wayside. Many historians credit the strong evangelical influence of the non-Anglican churches (Methodist, Baptist, Scottish Presbyterian, etc.) for this tightening of moral values in Britain, rather than laying the blame at the feet of the fun-loving young woman Victoria was when she ascended the throne. Victoria’s very serious husband, Albert, also comes in for his share of finger-pointing for obliterating the open highjinks which characterized the early part of the nineteenth century—the “Regency” era.

The first, most obvious, sign of the new era—not counting Napoleon’s megalomania—was a dramatic change in clothing. Beau Brummel took men out of brilliantly colored satin and put them into short-fronted, often dark, tailcoats, a style still seen in the modern tuxedo. He was also a strong advocate of cleanliness, a virtue almost unknown in the eighteenth century. In France, Josephine Bonaparte exemplified a similar revolution for women, taking them out of pinched waists, panniered hoop skirts and towering headdresses. Other significant features of the eighteenth century also bit the dust—powdered wigs, swords, coffee houses, even rampant lawlessness—began to fade away. In fact, men were more likely to wear corsets than women, as it was they who now had the skin-tight fashions, while women could luxuriate in the comfort of a high waist and a single chemise beneath lightweight columnar gowns (a classic Greek influence, also popular in Regency furniture and other household design).

**Manners.** Although the nobility tended to live lives of hedonistic pleasure in the Regency, formal good manners were an inescapable part of the era. If an author has a member of the nobility flout the rules of his/her day without a very good reason, you have a right to wonder about the author's feel for the period. An uneducated person might flout the rules of manners out of ignorance; a villain might do so deliberately, but, in general, good manners and a code of personal honor were demanded. Unfortunately, then, as today, some people were able to get away with hidden transgressions as long as they maintained a facade of good manners.

**What's in a Name?** So-called "Traditional Regencies" were first created in the Regency era by the talented pen of Jane Austen, who delighted English society quite anonymously. The opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* is still among the best-known quotes in the English language: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." In the early to mid twentieth century, Ms. Austen's special style was revived, and added to, by the now-famed Georgette Heyer. Both ladies used magnificent characterizations, dry humor, and knowledge of the foibles of society to create a wonderful picture of the early nineteenth century.

"Regency-set Historicals" are a much more recent creation, a result of Historical Romance's tendency to move out of the Old West and the Civil War, taking its sexy and swashbuckling plots into the mannered society of the Regency. In my opinion, these novels only work if the author has done her homework. If she understands the manners, clothing, customs, and history of the period before she runs away with the bit, violating the rules.

**Publishers.** E-publishers and small presses are attempting to pick up the slack left by Signet and Zebra abandoning the trad Regency market. Cerridwen Press has been the most vocal about their interest in traditional Regencies. The market for Regency-set Historicals is still broad, splashing across the entire New York publishing

spectrum. There are rumors the demand is diminishing, along with the demand for Historicals in general, but I'll believe it when I see it. The Regency is a delightful period, a transition from the free-wheeling eighteenth century to the glorious empire, yet stultifying mores, of the Victorian era. Those of us who love the style and language of trads can only hope major print publishers will once again come to appreciate that they serve a valuable readers' niche in mass market publishing.

**Length.** The so-called "traditional" Regencies are usually 70-75,000 words. Regency-set Historicals are mostly around 100,000, with 95-110,000 not uncommon.

**Sex.** Regencies tend to be squeaky clean, with intimation of, or glimpses of, consummation only between married couples. In a Regency-set Historical at least two scenes of explicit sex are expected. Many have far more! And they seem to get more sensuous each year.

**Money.** Authors will make more money writing Historicals than traditional Regencies. Sex sells. Nonetheless, many authors prefer to write the intricate language and effervescent style of the traditional Regency. My personal belief is that in our present chaotic world it's good to have a book that can be read by anyone from a teenager to great-aunt Tillie. In my Regencies I've had naked portraits, buried treasure, scandals, murder, kidnapping, etc., but the books avoid excessive blood and violence and explicit sex. This is a strong characteristic of a traditional Regency.

**Humor.** Most of the best Regencies and many of the Regency-set Historicals contain humor. The early nineteenth century was a sophisticated age of well-spoken, well-mannered, frequently clever people. Wit was prized. (Beau Brummel would have been nothing without it.) Yes, a woman had to be careful not to be too clever, but what's changed about that?!

**Language - Traditional Regency.** This is one of the "great divides" between the

two kinds of Regency romances. Traditional Regencies pride themselves on the authenticity of their language, the quality of the repartee, the correct details on manners, costume, furnishings, *objets d'art*, carriages, household management, recipes, etc. Sentences tend to run on, even in dialogue. There is much more “flow” of language than in an Historical.

**Language - Regency-set Historicals.** In addition to more sex and swashbuckle, Historicals generally use modern English and shorter sentence structure, with only a few catch words thrown in (“bloody hell,” for example, has been done to death). If, however, an author uses words or concepts so modern they were completely unknown in the early nineteenth century, you can assume she has little knowledge of, or respect for, the era about which she is writing. Some of the modern expressions one can encounter are enough to jar a reader right back into the twenty-first century. (One of the most famous of these unacceptable modernisms was the author who referred to the Regency’s famed Cyprian’s Ball as “The Hooker’s Ball.”)

**Drama - Traditional Regencies.** Although I tend to put more action into my Regencies than some, this is another huge divide between the two Regency styles. Traditional Regencies are generally tales of home and family. Even if there’s a smuggler or even a murder, the emphasis is on how the family is affected. The drama lies in interaction between people; not just the hero and heroine, but between various extended family members, some of whom can be eccentric. Or among typical members of the community. The “community” can be London, Bath, Brighton, a country house, or a village. The drama can extend outside of England, if the author is knowledgeable about that place.

One “Jane Austen” rule I personally break in all my books is ignoring the Peninsular War. I’ve never been able to do that. The single greatest outside influence on Britain during the Regency was Europe’s war with Napoleon, and Britain was fighting its share of the battle in Spain and Portugal, under direction of Arthur Wellesley. The

fledgling United States were also at war with Britain during this time, mostly at sea (the “War of 1812”). And if we have American characters in our Regencies, we have to remember that France, not England, was our friend! Oh, horrors!

In the same context of keeping your wars straight, an author should never, ever, have an English nobleman sailing into a British-occupied Boston harbor during this period (as I actually read in a *published* novel). Boston was occupied during the American Revolution, *not* during the War of 1812.) Authors of both kinds of Regencies need to keep in mind that America of this era was no longer “the colonies,” and although a Brit might sail to Canada or the British Caribbean islands, travel by sea was severely restricted between Britain and the U.S.A. during the years of what Americans call the War of 1812.

Back to the Peninsular War that made Arthur Wellesley the Duke of Wellington. Authors of Traditional Regencies should probably avoid making the war an active part of their books. Keep the war to the shorter, simpler scale of your Regency plot. [For example, in *The Indifferent Earl* (winner of the Romantic Times Award for Best Regency of 2003 and finalist for RWA’s RITA), the hero’s brother has just returned from having his “tail whopped” by the Americans at the Battle of New Orleans. This, of course, creates some major sparks between the American heroine and her new British acquaintances, but does not have the war actively intruding on the smaller scale of the Traditional Regency plot.]

**Drama—Regency-set Historical.** Here, the action can be larger than life. These books can have much broader, more violent action. They can encompass thieves, smugglers, vicious guardians, beatings, brothels, hard-hearted madams, pimps, etc. Some of these can certainly be in traditional Regencies, but the Historical villains are nastier, the heroes and heroines sexier, and more inclined to say words no traditional Regency hero or heroine would allow to pass his/her lips. The heroines tend to be more daring than Regency heroines, sometimes idiotically so. Almost any aberration, short of

a homosexual relationship, is acceptable. I would still recommend keeping any members of the nobility away from vulgar behavior. It simply wasn't the way things were. If vulgarity seems necessary to you, then its use must be justified.

**Style—Traditional Regency.** The elusive effervescent style of the traditional Regency is a combination of many things: the use of the subtle humor, droll characterizations; precise language with the extensive vocabulary of the well-educated; authentic details, such as correct clothing, furniture, social clubs; small-scale drama, such as family conflicts and social dilemmas. Vulgar characters and vulgar manners can appear only if they are part of a certain person's characterization. Vulgarity and lack of manners are never allowed in the hero, heroine, or any of the "good guys" among their family and friends.

If done correctly, all these elements add up to a magical effervescence, a glorious depiction of a time gone by when men were noble, ladies were charming, and honor was an important word. No one of the above—for example, getting the details right—will suffice by itself. The whole picture of the Regency world depends on getting the "feel" of the era correct, not just the details. Painting on a broad canvas, if you will, rather than getting the correct manufacturer of the silver epergne on the dining table.

**Style - Regency-set Historicals.** Humor and good characterizations are important here as well, although humor is not an absolute requirement. Since Historicals are longer, there's more room for secondary characters and even a sub-plot. But, as mentioned above, language is very different. While avoiding obvious anachronisms and throwing in just enough Regency language to add a dash of flavor, the English is basically modern, the sentence structure more four-square. Shorter, more direct than in traditional Regencies. The vocabulary does not stretch the imagination or make the reader wrinkle her nose and say, "Huh?" As mentioned above, the drama, the conflicts, are usually stronger, more hard-hitting. They frequently involve people or situations outside the family. They can even be national, or international, in scale. In Historicals, vulgar characters or vulgar manners can appear, the language of

the situations depicted can be stronger than in a traditional. I would, however, caution that if a member of the nobility, particularly a main character, acts contrary to the generally accepted rules of the era, then those actions must be thoroughly justified; i.e., a reason must be given. Not even an Historical can violate the rules that much. Or rather, yes, you *can* do it, but knowledgeable readers and reviewers will not accept it.

**Common mistakes.** Among the things that offend Regency readers of both genres are: incorrect use of English titles. Titles are almost an art form. And they are not flexible. Faithful Regency readers tend to have an excellent grasp of titles, so, attention, authors! You can't write about this era without understanding titles. Another top-of-the-line offense: having a bastard inherit a title or having a legitimate heir "disinherited." Can't be done. No way, no how.

**Another frequent error.** Use of terms that could not possibly have been known in that era (a reference to train tracks, for example; to Freudian psycho babble, or, heaven forbid, a *zipper*). Use of eighteenth century clothes in an era when fashions had made a dramatic change; i.e., no hoop skirts, wigs, or tricorne hats allowed. Swords and highwaymen were also fading into obscurity. Duels were illegal. Yes, they happened, but furtively, and not nearly so frequently as in the past.

**Unacceptable manners.** Other no-no's include: having members of the nobility, or even the gentry, fall into casual conversation with someone to whom they have not been introduced, particularly in a formal setting, such as a ball or court presentation. Use of first names. A couple might be betrothed before they were on a first-name basis. Manners count, even in an Historical. Yes, characters in an Historical will be more likely to break away from their upbringing, but that core of civilization should still be there, particularly in the hero and heroine. They should triumph because of who and what they are, and also because of what their society made them.

Although Regency society was outwardly frivolous, leading to the radical swing to what we now call Victorian morality, there was a basic core of responsibility, a

nobleman's or noblewoman's sense of *noblesse oblige*. Of course, not everyone got beyond complacency in their own life—as so frequently happens today—but many must have, or it could not have produced the people necessary to defeat Napoleon, build marvelous new buildings, and establish the first organized, and centrally led, police force in Britain's history. Nor would we look back on the era with such fond nostalgia.

Whether you call it “the Napoleonic era,” “the Regency,” or “late Georgian,” the era of c. 1795-1830 is one of the most dramatic times in the history of the world. It is a time of war. And gaiety. Sorrow and pain. Downright hedonism. It is social manners taken to the ultimate degree. It is the heyday of the Industrial Revolution when merchants were becoming wealthier than noblemen. There was more education, for a wider range of people. More ideas. New evangelical churches, mostly appealing to the middle and lower classes, and beginning to preach a new morality. There were riots. The landed class lived in terror of a French-style revolution, which was based on the rebellion of the American colonies, both well within the lifetimes of most people of the Regency.

As for the role of women, for all their restrictions, women of the Regency had more freedom than they would in the coming strict Victorian society. Women, particularly widows, had much greater leeway than after the terrible shadow that would turn them into black-clad recluses in imitation of Victoria after she lost Albert. In the Regency, a woman with independent funds could still have a reasonable amount of freedom. She could even enjoy herself. Nor were the ladies of the Regency pressed into fainting fits by wasp-waisted corsets!

With Mary Wollstonecraft leading the way, women seemed on their way to far more independence, until they ran into a barrier of evangelical morality and a male reversion to tyranny that would last until women a hundred years later cut off their hair and their hemlines and demanded the vote.

So what happened? Just as the Flower Children rebelled against the unrealistic ideals of the Nineteen Fifties, and life in the Nineteen Eighties did everything it could to eradicate the last vestiges of the Flower Child rebellion, our customs and manners are cyclical. Regency Britain stands out, however, as World War II stands out. It was a

time of enormous social upheaval, characterized by a high society that often seemed to be doing its best to ignore the serious things of life. So what else is new? And, as I've mentioned, in spite of outward appearances, these were the ancestors of those who fought the Battle of Britain. Noble. Strong. Resolute. The men of this time were seldom known for ruling their women with an iron fist. This cannot be said of Victorian times. Which is a major reason why I write—and read—Regencies.

And the next time you do the same, I hope you'll find this article has brought you a better understanding of what makes Regency novels tick—why we write them and why we love to read them.

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Among my favorite Regency Research books:

<i>The Prince of Pleasure</i>	J. B. Priestley
<i>Our Tempestuous Day</i>	Carolly Erickson
<i>Life in Regency England</i>	R. J. White
<i>Wellington—Years of the Sword</i>	Elizabeth Longford
<i>Beau Brummell</i>	Hubert Cole
<i>The Terror Before Trafalgar</i>	Tom Pocock

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Blair Bancroft's Regencies include:

<i>The Indifferent Earl</i>	Signet, March 2003
<i>The Major Meets His Match</i>	Signet, August 2003
<i>A Season for Love</i>	Signet, February 2004
<i>The Harem Bride</i>	Signet, July 2004
<i>The Lady and the Cit</i>	Signet, March 2005
<i>Lady Silence</i>	Signet, July 2005