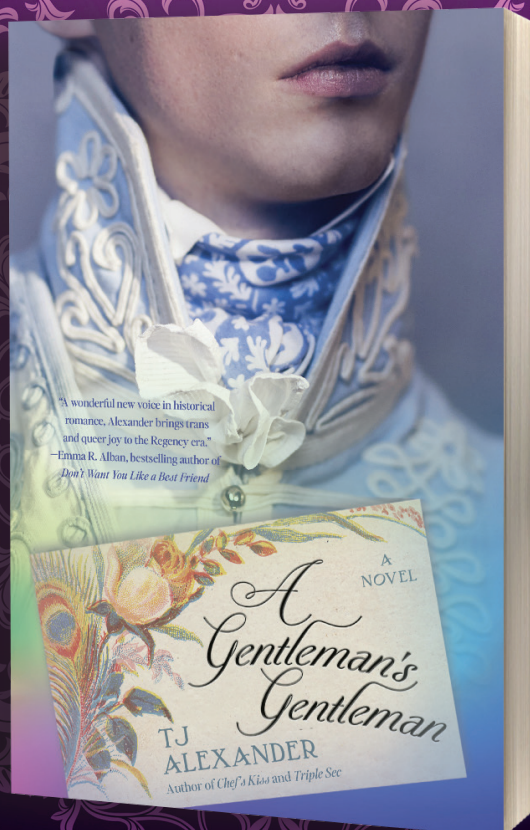


# *A Gentleman's Gentleman*

By TJ Alexander

**BOOK CLUB KIT**



# Q&A with TJ Alexander

**Q: What was the initial spark or idea that led to the creation of *A Gentleman's Gentleman*? Were there any real-life experiences or historical events that influenced the story?**

**A:** Not for this one, really! The book that became *A Gentleman's Gentleman* was only the second novel I'd ever written. I'd been toying with the idea of a Regency romance since way back in 2018 or '19, but hadn't gotten very far. When my debut was on submission, waiting to be sold, this was the project I decided to pick up and work on to distract myself from the stress of all that. Since Christopher's story had been marinating in my head for a while, it all came together pretty quickly. As far as inspiration goes, I knew there had to be horses. What's a Regency romance without horses? But the only real-life inspiration was not having a trans historical romance to read when I was younger, so I guess you could say it's all based on spite.

**Q: How did you approach the development of Christopher and James, and what inspired their unique personality traits and backgrounds?**

**A:** I knew from the start I wanted there to be an upstairs/downstairs dynamic because I'm a big fan of British period pieces. A silly lord and a stoic manservant, I mean, come on. There's so much comedy to mine there, and a lot of interesting things to say about power—what power really is, who has it, all of that. So the starting point of Christopher's character was, pretty simply, a rich young man who's never had to conform, but that comes at a cost. He's isolated, he's very lonely, but he gets to be as eccentric as he likes. That gives us a lot of runway with the plot: what happens when he's forced out of isolation? How will he cope with stepping back into society?

In some ways it's very similar to James, who starts off in the story being very taciturn and almost unknowable, but slowly is forced out of his shell by necessity and genuine fondness for this guy who, yes, is his employer but is also his responsibility. A lord and his manservant share a pretty intimate relationship even when it's strictly professional; they spend a lot of time together and are involved in each other's business to a near-uncomfortable degree. So these two men needed to have the kind of personalities that would be fun to see coming together in that situation.

**Q: Do you have a favorite character in the book, and if so, why? What makes them stand out to you personally?**

**A:** It is a curse of many writers to fall in love with your side characters, and I am not immune. There are a couple side characters in the book who are just plain fun to write. Etienne, Christopher's best friend and tailor, is a delight. I loved every scene he was in. Verbena Montrose, the society gossip who gives Christopher and us a download on all the hot tea—she's also a treat. Side characters get to have all the fun of sparkling dialog and witty comebacks without any of the tragic backstories that our heroes have, which is why they're so attractive.

**Q: How did you choose Regency era England as your setting, and what research did you undertake to bring these places to life?**

**A:** I'm going to be real with you: I do not remember doing a ton of research. I might have looked up small things like "was this thing invented by 1819?" or "what kind of dresses were popular?" but I didn't do a deep dive into the time period or anything. I was not bothered with getting that "right" because, in a sort of petty way, I didn't see why I should care to. When the vast majority of the genre doesn't bother to include anyone like you, I don't think you owe it to the genre to get every historical detail correct. I wanted to write a Regency book because, at the time, there weren't any Regency romances with trans main characters. Thank goodness that's changing slightly, but my gosh. It's a time period so defined by roles and etiquette, and, in romances, how to bend those rules, so for me it's a clear allegory for transgender identities. My feelings on historical accuracy are more complicated now than when I first wrote this book, but I still feel that there is a vast difference between historical fact and genre conventions, and personally I won't sacrifice the story to either of those things if I have to choose.

**Q: Can you describe your writing process for this book? Are you a pantsner (a writer who flies by the seat of their pants, i.e. doesn't plan anything out) or a plotter (a writer who plots everything out before writing)?**

**A:** I am a pantsner who has been forced into plotting. For most of my books, I have had to write an outline and maybe a sample chapter so that my agent can try to sell the idea before the book is written. This is a much better way for me to make a living because it means I get paid at least a little before sitting down to write the whole thing. And, yes, unfortunately...plotting does help move things along more quickly. But if I had my druthers, I would write every book the way this one was written: by daydreaming about it off and on for years and then writing it with no deadline hovering over me. That's not financially viable, however.

**Q: What were some of the biggest challenges you faced while writing this book, and how did you overcome them?**

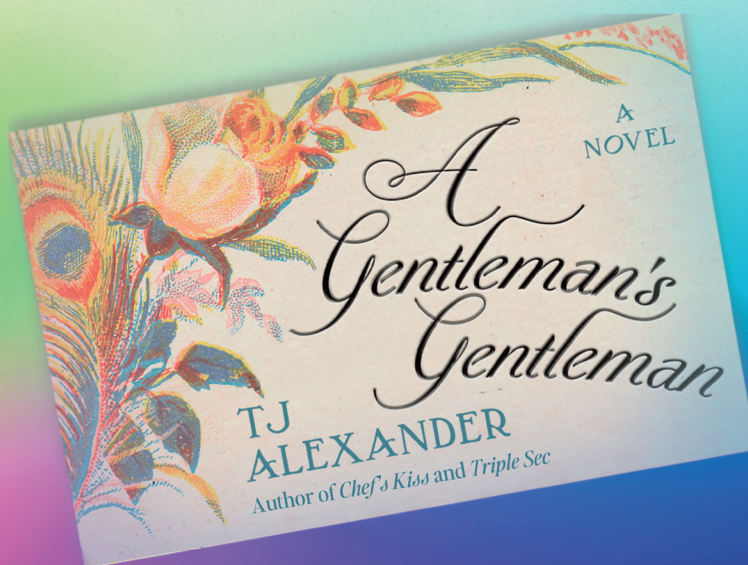
**A:** Probably the biggest issue I had in writing this book--and I'll try not to spoil anything--was a couple of surprises that crop up in the plot. (I hate the word "twists" but I guess they're twists.) Having lived with this story in my head for three or four years, these turns were no longer surprising to me, so of course I worried that they were very obvious and silly. Luckily, I had great first readers and an agent who could tell me, no, actually, I could even stand to sprinkle in a little more foreshadowing. I can't say too much, but if you are a person of a certain age you will probably be familiar with a film where the Twist Ending defined transgender characters for a generation, and not in a positive way. (Actually, now that I type that out I realize I could be referring to multiple films, which is pretty sad.) I didn't want these plot turns in this book to come off that way. I was very nervous about it. If there was any part of this book I agonized over, it was that. My hope is I succeeded in taking that tired old way of writing about trans people and turned it into something new.

**Q: Were there any particular authors or books that influenced your writing style or the development of *A Gentleman's Gentleman*?**

**A:** I think readers of PG Wodehouse's stories will see some influence here for sure. I can't help that; I was raised on them. There are a few small homages to famous Regency adaptations, which I have never seen. I only know the memes from the internet. Like I said, I wrote this in a bit of a snit.

**Q: Can readers expect to see more stories set in the same universe or featuring the same characters in the future?**

**A:** Yes, thank you for asking! Verbena Montrose will star in her very own historical romance, *A Lady for All Seasons*, out in 2026. A few other characters will also pop in. I am very excited to share that with everyone.



# Book Club Discussion Questions

1. How much do you personally know about England's Regency period (1811-1820, depending on your definition)? Did you find the setting of *A Gentleman's Gentleman* to be historically accurate or not? If not, what are some reasons an author of a historical romance might eschew accuracy?
2. When we first meet Christopher in Chapter 1, he is preparing to dress himself in "[a] waistcoat of exquisite pale silk, embroidered in gold vines. A pristine shirt paired with his everyday cravat: they were all placed meticulously on the small upholstered bench that stood in the center of the dressing room, lined up like soldiers ready for battle. Christopher surveyed his troops with a keen eye and found no loose threads or stray scuff marks." What do you think Christopher's interest in men's clothing says about him? About men of the Regency in general? How is that different from how modern men might regard fashion?
3. One of Christopher's eccentricities is the informal relationship he has with his small staff, Cook and Plinkton. Why do you think the author made a point of having Christopher be friendly with his employees? What practical ways does this function as a plot device, and how does it affect the characters?
4. In some romance novels, the characters have a "meet cute" where the first meeting is sweet, loaded with obvious attraction, and full of promise. The first time Christopher meets James, "the very sight of the new man was enough to put Christopher in a foul mood. What right did a valet have to look so handsome? For whom was this sharp jawline and lush, dark hair? Some people were too perfectly formed to be alive, and this man was one of them. Christopher could spit, he was so incensed, but he soldiered on. Even burning with envy, he had to be polite." (page 21) Would you describe this as a "meet ugly," the meet cute's opposite? Why do you think a character, especially a queer one, might have complicated feelings when meeting their future love interest for the first time?
5. Christopher and James are both accomplished horsemen, with Christopher being very devoted to his horse, Orion. In an era before the automobile, what place do you think horses have in Regency society? Why do you think "horse girl" has become the modern phrase to describe someone with an interest in horses? How does this show a change in our culture's gender and class expectations?
6. When Christopher proposes a rather unusual employment arrangement, James resists at first, saying, "The relationship between a man and his valet should be based on trust and mutual understanding. However, I do not expect such sacred things to spring up overnight. If you prefer to dress yourself, my lord, as your valet, I can only strive to be of service to you in other ways and hope, in time, that we reach a point where you trust me to do it for you. I am very good at what I do, Lord Eden. Could you possibly imagine yourself allowing me those duties in the future once I have proved myself to you?" (page 37) When reading this passage, why did you think James was so insistent that he be allowed to do his job, even when

the pay would be the same regardless? By the end of the book, when we know James and his background better, did your reasoning for his motivations change?

7. The book changes venues from the Eden estate, to bustling London, and back again to Eden. How do these two settings differ, and how does locale affect the characters' actions? Did you prefer reading about one over the other? What could the country (Eden) and the city (London) symbolize?
8. In Chapter 9, Christopher and James share an intimate moment late at night in the kitchen. What about their conversation makes them closer? Was there anything about the setting that bolstered that feeling of closeness for you?
9. We meet Christopher's best friend, confidant, and tailor Etienne Charbonneau in Chapter 10. How would you describe their relationship? Why do you think it was necessary to have a side character like Etienne in the story? What role does he play?
10. A ballroom scene is a hallmark of the Regency romance genre. In what ways does Christopher's experience at the Leftmores' ball fulfill this genre convention, and in what ways is it different from the usual ballroom scene?
11. The "action scene/carriage chase" revolves around a love story involving two side characters, Belinda and Chester. Why do you think Christopher is so eager to help the two lovers marry against all odds? What might James think about the situation, but be unable to say at that point?
12. Verbena Montrose assists in Christopher's scheme to unite Belinda and Chester, using her talent at spreading rumors. What role does gossip play in this story, and why is it so important in Regency romances? How might gossip affect a queer character differently from a cisgender, heterosexual one?
13. On the cusp of confessing several things that he's heretofore kept secret, Christopher tells James, "I know your sense of duty or what have you makes it difficult, but please, I am begging you—at least for the moment, call me Christopher." (page 239) In a world where some characters have many different names, titles and forms of address, what do you think is the significance of using a given, "Christian" name? Why would Christopher insist on this now?
14. James responds to Christopher's confession by revealing a secret of his own. Think about other pieces of media with transgender characters you might have encountered, especially media from the 1990s. What do you know about the concept of disclosure in the trans community? What reasons might a transgender person or character have for not disclosing their gender identity? Why do you think the author chose to give James's character this moment of revelation?
15. How is the ending of *A Gentleman's Gentleman* similar to other historical romances, and how is it different? Were you surprised by anything? What statement, if any, do you think the ending is making about queer love stories?

## *Further Things Your Reading Group Could Do:*

Watch the 2020 documentary *Disclosure* if your members are unfamiliar with the history of transgender representation in media.

Interested in learning more about real-life historical trans people? Consider taking a look at biographies about gender nonconforming people from the past, including those outside of Western culture.

Transgender people have always existed throughout history, but in the current climate, their stories are being erased. Learn about the Stonewall Riot, the birth of Pride, and the efforts of trans women of color in advancing the cause of LGBTQ+ rights in America. (<https://www.si.edu/stories/marsha-johnson-sylvia-rivera-and-history-pride-month>) Discuss what you as a group can do to help protect queer history. Some ideas:

- Hold a letter-writing party and tell your representatives you support transgender people's right to healthcare and living openly.
- Stand up against book bans that target queer and BIPOC stories. (<https://action.everylibrary.org/bannedbooks>)
- Support grassroots organizations that help trans people access services they need to survive. (<https://www.glitsinc.org/>)

# *A Gentleman's Gentleman Playlist*

**Afraid** - *The Neighborhood*

**We Have It All** - *Pim Stones*

**Deep Water (Acoustic Version)** - *American Authors*

**Happy Man** - *Jungle*

**Prodigal Son** - *Rationale*

**Lost** - *Dermot Kennedy*

**Pictures from the Past** - *Aleksey Chistilin*

**Never Tear Us Apart** - *The National*

**One of Me** - *Lil Nas X*

**The Darker the Weather, the Better the Man** - *Missio*

**Like Real People Do** - *Hozier*

**Let the Wind Carry Me Home** - *The Builders and the Butchers*