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## Ann B. Ross on Miss Julia Speaks Her Mind

Elizabeth Michaelson

Screwball comedy, character study, or both? In *Miss Julia Speaks Her Mind* (Morrow), when the Miss Julia's late husband's mistress shows up on her doorstep with her illegitimate son in tow, the stage is set in this funny and sad story.

The untimely appearance of Little Lloyd Springer leads to robbery, kidnapping, and a search for a missing will. But what really keeps things moving is Miss Julia herself: enraged, humiliated and forceful, she has thrown off a lifetime of propriety to speak her mind.

The book has found unexpected success with readers—an editor at William Morrow mistakenly informed author Ann B. Ross that her audience would be limited to women over forty in the Southeastern United States. So far, it's been published in almost a dozen countries, and Ross now has a deal with Viking for three more Miss Julia novels.

### Mystery Writing Without a Plan

From her home in Hendersonville, North Carolina, Ross recalls, "I always thought I would eventually write, and one of the things I regret is that I didn't learn more about the craft when I was young.



Miss Julia Speaks Her Mind  
Ann B. Ross

"I did not outline, I did not know where it was going, and I surprised myself at the humor: I'm a very serious person. I realized I had tapped into something in my brain that maybe had been simmering for a long, long while I think I had years

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Instead I married young, and we had three children, and we moved to a very small town. So I did all the things that were expected of me: church work, social work ... all volunteer, no money!" she laughs, then relents: "I raised the children, and they all turned out fine, so maybe I shouldn't forget that."

**think I had years of responses had packed back down and when I started Miss Julia, they all started coming out of her mouth!"**

**--Ann B. Ross**

Ross wrote two murder mysteries; *The Murder Cure* (Avon) and *The Murder Stroke* (Nordon) in the late '70s. She started writing when a snowstorm left Ross housebound with "all the children in the neighborhood. One morning without planning anything, I sat down by the fireplace with a yellow legal pad and I wrote: 'They found the body at 10:30 a.m.' Murder was on my mind!" She laughs. "I just wrote without any plan, and got about four chapters written." Several months later she went to a writers' conference and met Avon's Bob Wyatt, who urged her to complete the novel and eventually published it.

Ross went back to school for her B.A. in literature, graduating from the University of North Carolina at Asheville in '84. She then went to UNC, Chapel Hill for a Masters, and then stayed on for a Ph.D. ('91) in medieval religious literature. After that, Ross returned to Hendersonville and taught at her alma mater, UNC Asheville.

### **Miss Julia's Voice Comes Out**

While she was working on her dissertation, Ross was approached by an acquaintance, the novelist Doris Betts. Ross explains, "She stopped me and said, 'Don't you have something for someone to look at?' As it happened, Ross had been working on *The Pilgrimage*, a novel about a young girl on the Oregon Trail. But when an agent suggested she turn it into a historical romance, Ross put *The Pilgrimage* aside. Betts suggested that Ross contact a former William Morris agent, Rhoda Weyr, who was then staying in Chapel Hill to care for her injured daughter. So Ross sent Weyr the manuscript, expecting a lukewarm response at best. However, "Rhoda said, 'I can sell it!'" Ross remembers. "And she did!" It was published by MacMillan in about '88.

Some half dozen years later, Ross wrote to the Peter Miller Agency in New York about another book she had written, a 400-page fictionalized account of her son's experiences in the Atlanta police force. When the agency expressed interest, she offered to show them another project she'd been working on. This was *Miss Julia Speaks Her Mind*, which was then bought by William Morrow.

The character of Miss Julia started as voice in Ross' head: "I really don't hear voices," Ross insists, laughing. "But it was someone speaking, and I just began writing. All I knew was that it was an older woman, and she was very upset about something." Miss Julia was persistent, even at this early stage: "I kept having this image of this woman with a little round hat on her head and a pocketbook on one arm,

holding the hand of a skinny little boy."

She continues, "When I started, I thought it was going to be another murder mystery. In fact, I had already figured who was going to be the victim. But when it came down to it I couldn't do it."

So Ross kept writing, unsure of where the story was headed: "I did not outline, I did not know where it was going, and I surprised myself at the humor: I'm a very serious person," she chuckles. "Here was all this stuff coming out that would crack me up. And I realized I had tapped into something in my brain that maybe had been simmering for a long, long while I think I had years of responses had packed back down and when I started *Miss Julia*, they all started coming out of her mouth!"

### **Hypocrisy and Humor**

There was a model for Miss Julia's situation, if not her character: "I knew of a woman in this little town, oh, twenty-five, thirty years ago," explains Ross. "When her husband died, we were all shocked to learn that the woman had never learned to drive, she had never written a check or paid a bill. ... She was like an 80-year-old child. I thought about that situation every once in a while over the years, wondering if her husband had demanded that, or if she were following the biblical injunction to be submissive, if he resented her dependency or if she resented his oppression. Or maybe it suited both of them ... I'll never know," Ross admits. "But I think when I started writing *Miss Julia* in the back of my mind there was the thought, 'What if there was a woman who did everything she was supposed to do, conducted herself as her husband, church and small community demanded, and then, finds out because of what he had done, that it was all built on a lie?'" That's when the light bulb went on: "I thought, 'OK, this is why she's so angry. She's furious that she never knew any of this, and she had followed the standards set by others, and they weren't following them themselves.'"

Hypocrisy, particularly among the clergy, is a theme in *Miss Julia*; there is similar criticism of clerics in *The Pilgrimage*. Ross thinks that perhaps this is because as a religious woman, she herself has been disturbed by the church splits and greed that she's seen over the years: "I'm wondering if some of that isn't basically my theme: of being critical not to tear down but to show up, to reveal [hypocrisy]."

*Miss Julia* took a year and a half to write, "Because I didn't know where the story was going," Ross explains. A writers' group kept her plugging away at the story: "I kept at it, because I had to have something to turn in every once in a while!"

Ross' success has proved her editor at William Morrow wrong: clearly *Miss Julia* has struck a chord with readers outside of the Southeast. "So many people have come up to me and said, 'Oh, I know a *Miss Julia*! There's a *Miss Julia* in my hometown!' Something about her people recognize, and, I think, admire."

The sequel, tentatively titled *Miss Julia Takes Over*, will be released in Spring/Summer 2001. When asked about the

plot, Ross lowers her voice: "Well, I'll just tell you this much: She gets involved with a Nascar race car driver!" An unexpected turn of events, certainly, but then, Miss Julia does a lot of unexpected things.

**Elizabeth Michaelson** is a freelance writer living in New York City.

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