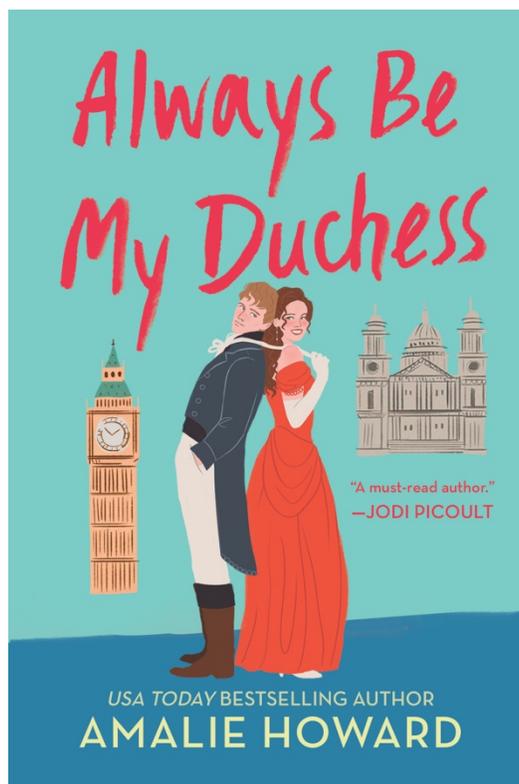




YOUR BOOK CLUB RESOURCE

Reading Group Guide



A Letter from the Author

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for picking up *Always Be My Duchess* and joining Lysander and Nève on their unconventional, impulsive, heartwarming, and definitely steamy adventure while they figured out what trust, hope, and falling in love meant for each of them. I hope you cheered for them as hard as I did on their way to a hard-won happily ever after!

This was such an incredible story to write. Not only did I get to write about some of my favorite things—grumpy heroes, dauntless heroines, ballet, and France, with a nod to my favorite '90s rom-com films—but this was my first book about a neurodivergent hero. At first I didn't set out to write Lysander this way, but while I was writing this book, I was heavily entrenched in therapy for my own neurodivergent teenage son that I found myself writing so much of his characteristics into my hero—smart with a slow processing speed, binary thinking, methodical, fixed on routine, anxious, direct, and no time for anything beyond what he sees as the milestones for success. However, his capacity for love is deep and infinite, and once given, his loyalty is unshakeable. As such, Lysander and his HEA will always hold a special place in my heart.

As far as ballet, I attended a ballet school for nine years with the Caribbean School of Dancing, advancing through the international Royal Academy of Dance program, though I was by no means prima ballerina material. I loved it, however, and even performed multiple productions onstage at the Queen's Hall performing arts center in Trinidad when I was a girl.

It was very interesting researching ballet during the nineteenth century, especially since dance and music were so romanticized in art. Behind the scenes, however, conditions were less than palatable, and dance was viewed as a disreputable profession. In Paris, girls entered the ballet

at a young age, working toward positions in the corps de ballet. They were often poor, isolated, and vulnerable to exploitation and harassment. The wealthy, powerful patrons of the Paris Opera—called abonnés—were little more than predators, allowed into the foyer de la danse for an enormous subscription fee, who often made propositions to the dancers to become their mistresses. According to my research, in some cases, mothers even advocated for their daughters to make these arrangements because of the stability, money, and protection they offered. These rich patrons had huge control over who received roles and who did not. In my story, my heroine fends off the advances of one such man and pays the price for it when she's fired from the production and barred from every reputable theater in Paris and London. But she is determined not to be a casualty of adversity, despite the odds stacked against her.

Nève was inspired by a few nineteenth-century ballerinas, including Carlotta Grisi and Marie Taglioni. Grisi started dance at age seven, earned roles onstage from the age of ten, and was on tour by fourteen. Her first performance in *Giselle* led to instant fame. In 1858, Taglioni had her first major role at sixteen in *La Sylphide* at the Paris Opera. After Taglioni retired, she taught social dance to high society ladies and children in London. She was also known for choreographing one ballet, *Le Papillon*, in 1860. Emma Livry, who is mentioned in my story as a friend of the heroine, danced the principal role in this ballet, however she died tragically onstage when her ballet costume caught fire from the gaslights in 1863. The ballet troupe that the hero hires for Nève's birthday was the actual cast of *Le Papillon* performing onstage in France during that period!

My heroine was such an interesting character to write. Given the power dynamics and the transactional nature of the plot (money for companionship), she had to be strong in her convictions and have a deep sense of self and female agency. As a dancer who has faced many challenges in her life, she knows what her limits are . . . and what she's willing to do to meet, cross, or change them. Like many women, we've faced hard choices in our lives, but all we can do is use the information we

have at hand and make the best decision for ourselves. My heroine also needed to be someone who could not only challenge and wholly accept those idiosyncratic parts of the hero but stay true to herself in the process.

One last note on the epilogue: While Nève and Lysander are able to conceive despite Nève's complications with amenorrhea, I am intimately aware that this is not the outcome for everyone who struggles with infertility. Like Nève, I, too, struggled with amenorrhea (indirectly related to dance) and was told that I would not be able to have children. And yet, despite two of my three pregnancies being high risk and one with infertility complications, I am beyond thankful that I was able to overcome the odds. My heart goes out to each and every one of you who have traveled this journey.

Hope you enjoyed reading Nève and Lysander's story as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Thanks for reading!

xo, Amalie

Discussion Questions

- 1) Despite feminism being an anachronistic concept, it was not anachronistic behavior, especially for women in historical times who wanted to break free of traditional roles or expected rules of conduct. Nève's actions would have been considered vulgar by her aristocratic peers, given that she has gone from a viscount's daughter to working as a ballet dancer in an effort to provide food and shelter for herself and her sister. If you were in Nève's shoes, would you have chosen to follow or flaunt the rules of society?
- 2) There was a distinct lack of support toward any kind of female agency during the Victorian time period, especially by men when it came to women and women's rights. What did you most appreciate in the heroine's approach to fighting against male power dynamics in the ballet world: a) not giving in to the indecent proposal made to her, or b) doing what she had to do in order to keep dancing? Do you think there were any other choices she could have or should have made? What might you do differently in a similar circumstance?
- 3) In a time when modesty was renowned and women's bodies were fully covered, ballerinas wore skimpy clothes, were sexualized and fetishized, especially when viewed through the male gaze. Despite how much ballet was revered in art, many had pejorative opinions about it as an occupation, and actresses/ballerinas were considered to be women of loose morals. Do you think this has changed from the eighteenth century to contemporary times? Or do you think such stereo- types still exist, and women in this occupation still face criticism and bias? Why is that?
- 4) Lysander is a neurodivergent hero. In that era, there would have been no diagnosis of such a condition, and even if he had been seen by a doctor, one of the most common treatments of any behavioral malady was laudanum. As such, he has taught himself how to be successful and driven within the parameters of his disorder as well as on the heels of abuse from his father for being dim-witted and slow. How did your opinion of the hero change as you read the book and you embraced him through the heroine's eyes, especially when it came to his men- tal and behavioral challenges? Did it change your opinion of either of them as well? Did either or both of them experience personal growth via their interactions with each other?

5) The story is set in the Victorian era with ties to specific economic and social structures in both railway development and ballet. Real figures, like Emma Livry, the ballerina, or George Leeman, head of the North Eastern Railway in England, were interwoven with fictional characters to bring a level of authenticity and breadth to the story. Do you feel these historical figures enhanced the story or would you prefer all your characters to be fictional and/or leaning toward historical fantasy (creative liberty taken with events and characterization for the period)?

6) One of the biggest considerations in writing historical romance is writing for an audience that is reading through a modern lens. The patriarchal structure, archaic social customs, as well as the lack of rights for women make it a challenge to write feminist concepts that modern-day readers will connect with without sanitizing some of the ills of history. Is it difficult to keep our own contemporary thinking from influencing the reading of a historical fiction story? Are there some themes that remain the same going back to the nineteenth century? Which symbols and or/themes in the Victorian context do you feel still resonate today?

7) In Regency and Victorian times, the aristocracy was very privileged, influential, and elite. Access to those circles was highly guarded by both station and fortune. Lysander hides Nève's true identity to pass her off as a member of the gentry with connections to the peerage. Did you take away a greater understanding of what a couple like the heroine and hero might have faced during this time and place in history, from peers and friends, especially coming from such a disparate social and class gap? What kind of challenges and gossip might they have faced, individually and together?

8) One of the works quoted and passionately discussed in the novel between the hero and the heroine was *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. Do you think there is a correlation between Heathcliff and Lysander, and do you see any parallels between them? In terms of personal desire, obsession, social classes and conflict, and the ends a man might go in pursuit of what he wants, do you see similar themes at play? How so, and what was done differently in *Always Be My Duchess*? What other themes do you see?

9) Simone de Beauvoir was a French writer from the early twentieth century, nearly half a century from when *Always Be My Duchess* was set. One of her quotes on la condition féminine was, "No one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who

is anxious about his virility.” In the Victorian era and particularly the world of the demimonde, misogyny was common, and the heroine faces two kinds of men—those as described in de Beauvoir’s quote and those whose “virility” isn’t defined by sexism. How has Lysander’s attitude toward women, and the heroine in particular, defied this kind of typecasting for the era? What did you appreciate best about him?

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