

ARRANGED MARRIAGE PERFECT JUXTAPOSE IN GOTHIC TWISTER

An interview with *New York Times* and
USA Today bestselling author Michelle M. Pillow

By Tyler Tichelaar, Ph.D.

Q: How long have you been writing professionally?

Michelle: My first paranormal romance was published in 2004 under the title *The Mists of Midnight*. It has since been revised and was just re-released under the title *Forget Me Not*.

Q: How many novels have you published?

Michelle: Over 100.

Q: Wow. What's your secret for producing so much? Do you write on a specific schedule?

Michelle: I wish there was a magic formula I could share, but it comes down to hard work. I treat writing like a career — one that I love, but one that demands a lot of work and dedication due to the competitive nature of the business. It's a full-time-plus job that I'm always doing.

At any given time, I'll have several projects in various stages. Some are in the planning and research stage. Others are being written. Then others will be with editors. Then there are aspects of being a professional author that people often forget about — namely marketing and promotions. It's not all book signings and appearances, either. I've had to learn how to build Websites, run online ad campaigns, and build graphics. It's a balancing act, and there are times where I'm up until 3 a.m. just to make a deadline.

All that said, I absolutely love my job. To be a writer, I think that's important. You have to love it, feel it inside of you as something you have to do, or this industry and the sacrifices it demands will wear you down fast.

Q: Are all your books in the same genre?

Michelle: As a writer, I love to tell a story and not be



Michelle Pillow has more than 100 book titles to her name. She has been inspired by various authors, including Austen, Bronte, Dumas, James Fenimore Cooper, and Tolstoy, Steinbeck, Shelley, Stoker, and Poe.

Michelle Pillow's New Novel Reflects That Gothic Romance Is Alive and Well

Review by Tyler R. Tichelaar, Ph.D. and award-winning author of *Spirit of the North: A Paranormal Romance* and *The Gothic Wanderer*

As a scholar of the classic Gothic novel of the 19th Century, from time to time I like to read 21st Century Gothic novels to see how well the seeds that Mrs. Radcliffe planted are flourishing. I'm happy to report that authors like Michelle Pillow are keeping the Gothic tradition alive and well by utilizing standard Gothic plot devices but making them their own as the Gothic evolves into something more spiritual and less terrifying than its originators may have first imagined.

Forget Me Not has all the classic Gothic elements a reader could want, and it draws heavily upon those early novels for its setting and atmosphere. We can also define it as a regency novel — since it's set in England in 1812 — when George IV was still Prince Regent of England. Readers today might call it paranormal rather than Gothic, and, of course, it also falls into the romance novel category.

The story begins when Isabel Drake and her sister, Jane, are speculating about whether Rothfield Park is haunted. The family has let the manor house from its owner, the Marquis of Rothfield. Legend says that during a fire, a child and servant died in the house. Jane claims that she has seen evidence of hauntings in the castle, but Isabel thinks Jane has just let her imagination get the better of her after reading a “shilling shocker.” (Shilling shockers were popular short books in the 19th Century that often plagiarized longer best-selling Gothic novels and were abridged to be affordable, costing only a shilling.) This scene recalls Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and the thrills that Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe have over reading “horrid” novels by Mrs. Radcliffe and others.

Isabel, however, has bigger problems than ghosts. Her parents do not like how she treats her governess, so they have decided to hire a tutor approved by the colonel, nephew to the Marquis of Rothfield, whom they plan for her to marry. Isabel wants nothing to do with marrying the colonel or with a new tutor.

In anger, Isabel goes riding and comes to the woods, where a heavy mist is setting in. She meets there a mysterious child who asks her to play with her, but Isabel refuses, feeling spooked. As she tries to return home, she has an accident with a tree branch and falls from her horse.

Isabel has no memory of the accident, but by the time she recovers, she finds her parents have left her alone at Rothfield with her new tutor, Dougal Weston. Here, I admit, my willing suspension of disbelief was a bit challenged — no self-respecting noble family of this time would leave their daughter alone with just the servants and a handsome male tutor — but Michelle Pillow will provide some surprising and ultimately believable explanations for this chain of events before the novel is over.

Dougal Weston turns out to be unlike any tutor Isabel ever expected. He really doesn't teach her much of anything — just asks her to read and then discuss with him what she read. Isabel soon starts to suspect he isn't a tutor but someone with an ulterior motive for being at Rothfield.

Nevertheless, Isabel finds herself falling in love with him and confesses to him that she is now repeatedly seeing the ghost child. Dougal appears interested in the history of the house and the ghost child, but he also tries to comfort Isabel and calm her fears. His comforting eventually goes a bit too far — though Isabel doesn't object — and you guess it, they have quite enjoyable sex. Before long, Isabel is starting to consider how she might shirk off her social status and marriage expectations to run off and live in a cottage with Dougal.

Eventually, however, Isabel begins to suspect Dougal is just using her to learn more about the ghost child. Dougal then asks Reverend Stillwell to speak to Isabel about the ghosts. Reverend Stillwell is a sort of medium who can communicate with the dead; he explains things to Isabel about ghosts that make her feel more comfortable and realize she isn't crazy. He also will encourage Isabel and Dougal to seek happiness.

I can't say more without giving away all the plot twists, but I will just say that I love how Michelle Pillow takes old Gothic themes and makes them new. Before the story is over, there's even a cursed man who has made a Faustian pact to obtain knowledge from evil wizards in exchange for his soul. However, he can prevent himself from going to Hell if he captures other souls for the devil — a classic Victorian twist previously used by authors like George W.M. Reynolds in *The Necromancer* (1852). Pillow also draws on regency novel conventions — there's even a runaway marriage to Gretna Green, worthy of a Jane Austen novel. Finally, I didn't see the final plot twist at the end, though I think I should have, but in any case, I was delighted by it.

Forget Me Not is not quite Jane Austen, but if you enjoyed books like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies* or *Mr. Darcy, Vampyre*, then *Forget Me Not* should give you plenty of ghostly pleasure. If you're a fan of television shows like *The Ghost Whisperer* or films like *The Sixth Sense*, you'll also find more enjoyable modern spins on ghosts and the Gothic in these pages.

After you finish *Forget Me Not*, I suspect you will want to read more of Michelle Pillow's novels — fortunately, she has written plenty in both the romance and paranormal genres.

For more information about *Forget Me Not* and Michelle Pillow, visit www.MichellePillow.com. ♦



Michelle M. Pillow



limited by one time period or genre, so you'll see a variety of books under my name.

When I create characters and the worlds they live in, I like to set them down and throw things at them, and then just let them react the way their personalities and histories would dictate. I often never know how a story is going to end when I start it.

Q: Which authors inspire you?

Michelle: In high school, I loved the section of the library where I'd find books that hadn't been checked out for decades. This ended up being a lot of the literary classics – Austen, Bronte, Dumas, James Fenimore Cooper, and Tolstoy. *Pride and Prejudice* is still a favorite. The romantic in me loves the courtship of Darcy and Elizabeth, including his not-so-well-done first marriage proposal. These books were like little buried treasures I'd read on my lunch breaks. I have always loved history and, ultimately, went to college to study it, and these books afforded a peek into historical lives and struggles.

Later, I discovered Steinbeck, including his travelogue, *Travels With Charley: In Search of America*. His insights into the wide variety of people he met and into the universal feeling people had in longing to be somewhere else, anywhere but where they were, spoke to me, as I began to consider my own characters and their motivations.

Many of my books have historical and/or paranormal influences, even if they are not strictly historically set. Some of the stories that inspire me have inspired many, including Shelley and Stoker, along with various other Gothic writers and ideas. I find the Victorian notions of vampires entertaining and very in line with societal beliefs at the time – including not being able to enter a home without an invitation, which reflected the social art of how to properly call on a person's home and receive guests as

a way to safeguard decent people from evil. Edgar Allan Poe was another author I enjoyed, especially the mental breakdown in *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

Q: In your latest novel *Forget Me Not*, arranged marriage is the pretense for the story, which offers up all kinds of stringent gender roles. Was it a conscious decision to do that?

Michelle: Arranged marriages in the 1800s are simply a continuation of a phenomena that had been around since ancient times. Marriage was seen as a logical choice, from the desire to make advantageous matches for a family that were both financially sound and socially acceptable.

It was with the Victorians that the idea of romantic love really started to take real hold. Consider for a moment Queen Victoria and Prince Albert; theirs is recognized as a love match. *Forget Me Not* is set during the Regency period in a world that really marks a time of change between the thought processes of the Middle Ages to modern-day society as we recognize it. Now, we would hardly think it acceptable (and rightly so) that a woman belonged first to her father and then to her husband, including her belongings.

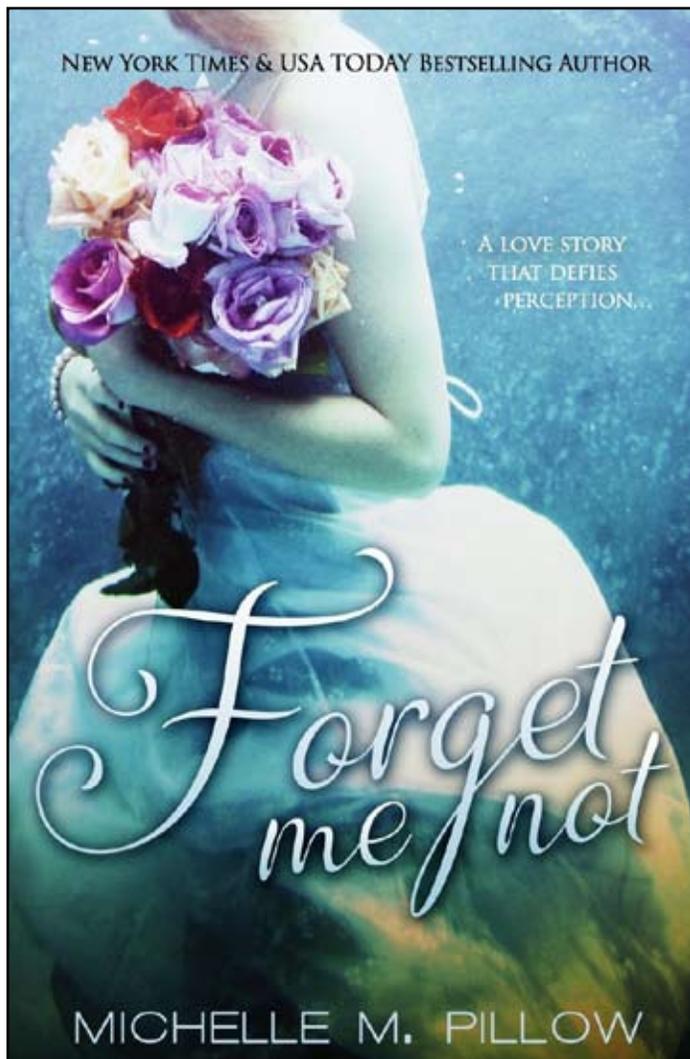
To be honest, though, arranged marriages create the perfect backdrop for romance and conflict to happen.

Q: Does your main character Isabel Drake rebel against protocol?

Michelle: Absolutely! Unlike her meeker younger sister, Jane, Isabel cares less about being a good and dutiful daughter and wants more out of life than to marry for money and comfort. The book takes place in 1812 when marriages weren't necessarily always arranged, but they were treated as more of a business decision than simply off the basis of love and desire.

The general opinion was that women needed a





“When the willfully independent Isabel Drake refuses to marry the man her parents want her to, her mother decides as punishment she will be forced to take lessons on how to be a proper lady. But the man sent to instruct her makes her feel anything but proper. Her attraction to Mr. Weston is instant ...”

breadwinner, and men wanted a woman who could take care of the home and children. Marriages became more of a partnership agreement, often instigated or encouraged by families.

As an interesting fact, in regards to a woman being the property of her husband, in 1882 the Married Women’s Property Act became law to allow a woman to own presents given to her. True story.

Q: Dougal Weston is Isabel’s “tutor” in the novel. Would you say he is the archetypical aloof romantic hero à la Mr. Darcy, or is he more of an antihero?

Michelle: Dougal is a classic leading man with his own personal goal to achieve in the story, nothing to do with

Isabel at first, even though he appears as her tutor. But when their stories collide, this whole new realm of possibilities opens up.

It adds several layers to the story, which peel back at the right time. Like everyone, these characters are complicated with many motivations and needs.

Q: Speaking of layers, there’s no shortage of twists – well-thought-of twists – in *Forget Me Not*. Did they come naturally, or were they devices as milestones that you built the story around?

Michelle: Great question. I was very lucky with this story. It was one of the first books I wrote, and it was actually the first one that was published back in 2004. And it flowed from start to finish. My muse was kind to me back then.

Q: Talking of muses, how do you see your muse?

Michelle: She’s a crazy lady with an endless supply of cups of coffee and a very demanding personality. I think she’d be happiest if I typed two books at once. *Dr. Who* fans will know what I’m talking about when I liken her to the angel statue in “Blink.”

Q: How or where does *Forget Me Not* fit in the stack of Michelle M. Pillow’s works?

Michelle: Well, it’s romance, which is what I do. But then the Regency and the Gothic (which I classify as Paranormal) aspect of it puts *Forget Me Not* slightly off center from my futuristic and shifter works.

When I started writing, Historicals were what I really wanted to do. But as it turned out, I found traction with other subgenres of romance.

Q: Is there a follow up to *Forget Me Not*?

Michelle: No. *Forget Me Not* is a standalone title. I do think it gives the reader’s mind plenty to daydream about and imagine in the world created, away from the words actually written.

I do have other historical novels, including the National RT Award winner *Maiden and the Monster*. It is a medieval-set historical romance. I also have other stories with the same feel and tone as *Forget Me Not*. One would be the shorter work, *Everlastingly*.

Q: Thank you, Michelle, for joining me today. Where can we learn more about your novels?

Michelle: Visit me at www.MichellePillow.com. Information and buy links for all of my novels are there. They can be found at most major bookstores. Thank you for having me. ♦