Mrs. Grant and Madame Jule Reading Group Guide

New York Times bestselling author Jennifer Chiaverini imagines the profound and complex relationship between First Lady Julia Grant and the courageous, resourceful woman whom she held in slavery. Since childhood they had been companions and confidantes; Julia secretly taught Jule to read, while Jule became her vision-impaired mistress's eyes to the world. But beneath the gathering clouds of war, the stark distinctions between mistress and slave inevitably strained and altered their tenuous friendship. Even as Julia Grant championed the Union cause and advocated for suffering women on both sides of the brutal conflict, she continued to hold Jule as a slave behind federal lines—until the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation inspired Jule to make a daring bid for freedom.

A CONVERSATION WITH AUTHOR JENNIFER CHIAVERINI

Q: *Mrs. Grant and Madam Jule* chronicles the fascinating, complicated relationship between Julia Dent Grant and the woman she enslaved, Jule. How did you discover their remarkable story?

A: I first became intrigued by Julia Dent Grant when I was researching the wartime experiences of Mary Todd Lincoln for my novel *Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker*. In March 1865, Mary had accompanied her husband to General Grant's headquarters at City Point, Virginia, and according to the searing descriptions many witnesses provided in their memoirs, the visit was an absolute disaster. Mary Lincoln apparently had a very public meltdown, probably sparked by a toxic combination of illness, stress, and jealousy of any woman that spoke to her husband alone. Julia Grant and her youngest son were living with the general at headquarters at the time, and Julia had taken on the thankless role of the First Lady's hostess. She tried to soothe Mary out of her terrible tempers, but she only succeeded in making herself the target of Mary's abuse. When I read that Mary accused Julia of wanting the White House for herself, I was struck by the irony of the charge, as Julia had no desire to be First Lady and had no idea that she nevertheless would be someday.

I also was surprised to discover that throughout the war, Julia often lived with her husband at military headquarters, traveling by steamer or railroad to join him whenever he considered his location safe enough. Then I happened to read an article in which, almost as an aside, the author noted that Julia often brought "her favorite slave" along on these excursions. I was absolutely

astonished by the utter incongruity—from my modern perspective, at least—of a Union general's wife owning a slave. Who was the enslaved woman, I wondered, and what had it been like for her to live in the camp of the Union army in the war that was supposed to end slavery forever? From that moment, Jule had a firm hold on my imagination, and I wrote *Mrs. Grant and Madam Jule* in part to satisfy my curiosity.

Q: Your novel also chronicles Julia's thirty-seven year marriage to Ulysses S. Grant, Union general and eighteenth president of the United States. By all accounts their marriage was happy and mutually fulfilling, but did your research uncover anything about their relationship that surprised you?

A: I think the very fact that it was so happy surprised me! This was not a match that any internet dating service would have arranged, because every algorithm would have predicted failure. Julia Dent was the beloved, pampered daughter of Missouri slave owners, western in temperament and southern by custom. Ulysses Grant was the son of Ohio abolitionists and a steadfast member of the fledgling Republican party. When they fell in love, their families were well aware that they came from two very different worlds. Julia's father initially refused to give them his blessing to marry, and he relented only after a very lengthy courtship. Ulysses's parents were so aghast that he had decided to marry a slaveowner's daughter, with her presumed "plantation airs," that they refused to attend the wedding. But Julia and Ulysses had much in common too—mutual attraction and affection, strong love of country, deep commitment to family life. Those shared values enabled them to overcome many obstacles set against them as a married couple—political differences, parental disapproval, the challenges of wartime, and the stresses of the presidency.

Q: This is your fourth stand-alone novel set in and around the Civil War, following *Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker*, *The Spymistress*, and *Mrs. Lincoln's Rival*. What is it about this time period for you that continues to spark fascinating narratives?

A: The Civil War era was a tumultuous and transformative period for our nation, showing the best and worst of humanity in stark contrast. Looking back, we discover great moral failings alongside true heroism in the struggle for justice, equality, and freedom. My personal heroes are people who face adversity with moral courage and dignity, whose hunger for justice and compassion for others lead them to stand up for what is right even at great risk to themselves. My favorite characters to write about either possess similar qualities, or are given the opportunity to summon up these qualities and do what is right but fall short. What the Civil War says about our country—that we are capable of both great moral failings and tremendous goodness—resonates strongly even today, and as a creative person, I'm drawn to explore and try to understand that conflict.

Q: Near the end of the novel, you describe the poignant circumstances in which Ulysses Grant wrote a memoir of his military experiences to provide for his family. Readers will learn that Mrs. Grant also wrote a memoir about her life, "not for pecuniary need, but for posterity." Ulysses Grant's book was published to great financial success and critical

acclaim. How did Julia Grant's book compare to her husband's? Was it useful in your research for *Mrs. Grant and Madame Jule*?

A: It may be unfair to compare the two memoirs, because Julia's was not published during her lifetime. She was very proud of her husband's success as an author and grateful for the financial security the unprecedented sales of his memoir provided, but she was astonished and disappointed to discover that she was hardly mentioned in it, even though she had often lived with him at military headquarters. A reader could be forgiven for assuming she had spent the war safe at home hundreds of miles away. Julia was motivated to write her memoir in large part to complete her husband's story with details of his marriage and family life. Julia's memoir became her passion project late in life, and she worked diligently for three years, always intending to publish. Unfortunately, when the time came to submit the manuscript, critics complained that her memoir was "too near, too close to the private life of the General for the public." It's hard to imagine that a book written today about a famous person by a spouse could be declined because it offered too much personal information, but not so in Julia's era. She was, of course, terribly disappointed that her memoir would not see print. Near the end of her life, she arranged for a typewritten version to be produced, presumably so that copies could be distributed to her children, but it was not until 1975, seventy-three years after her death, that it was finally published. In my research for *Mrs. Grant and Madame Jule*, Julia's memoir was invaluable in that it offered insight into her feelings, her reaction to significant historical events, and her relationships, but unfortunately it was less helpful as a historical record. If her manuscript had been edited and revised for publication during her lifetime, I'm sure that factual errors and disordered chronology would have been brought to her attention and would have been corrected, but even with its flaws, I found it an illuminating read.

Q: The lives of Ulysses and Julia Grant are well documented, but what of Jule? Was it a challenge to find source materials that documented her life?

A: Regrettably, there is almost no trace of Jule in the historical record. In her memoir, Julia Grant refers to Jule only a handful of times, but never by name and not always kindly—which I admit made me think less of Julia. A precious few details about Jule emerge from other sources. That her name was Julia and that she was often referred to as "Black Julia" I learned from an 1885 newspaper interview by Mary Robinson, another longtime slave within the Dent household. Mary Robinson is also the source of the description of Jule as a "tiny ginger-colored maid." Because of the scarcity of documented fact, almost all of the details about Jule in the novel are fictional, as are most of the people she encountered, both in slavery and in freedom.

Q: You always do incredibly in-depth research about the real-life stories of your subjects before putting pen to paper. Where did you find the most important resources and documents for this novel?

A: Julia and Ulysses's memoirs were very important in my research, but I also drew upon other people's memoirs, period newspapers, journals, and other primary and secondary sources. *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* (John Y. Simon, editor) were very helpful in establishing a timeline

for Ulysses's professional and family life. They also provide many of the personal letters he wrote to Julia and other family members throughout his life, a wonderful source of information about his thoughts, experiences, and relationships. Unfortunately, Julia was a far less prolific letter writer than her husband, so we don't have the same abundance of detail from her point of view.

Q: As an author of historical novels, you depart from the strict historical record and create, as you refer to *Mrs. Grant and Madame Jule* in the Author's Note, "a work of fiction inspired by history." How do you balance fact and fiction in your work? How much embellishment of history do you allow yourself for the story's sake?

A: I feel a responsibility to my readers to adhere to the historical record as closely as I can where significant events and people are concerned. I won't move the date of a Civil War battle because it would be more convenient for my plot, for example, or transform Julia Grant into an abolitionist to make her more appealing to modern readers. However, I'm usually comfortable taking liberties with lesser-known historical figures and situations. Some characters appearing in *Mrs. Grant and Madame Jule* are entirely my own invention—Jule's husband Gabriel, for example—and I omitted numerous friends, family, and servants who passed through the Dent and Grant households through the years rather than weigh down the story with a vast array of characters fated to surface only briefly and disappear soon thereafter.

But all liberties aside, the historical record isn't as strict and straightforward as you might imagine. I examine letters and memoirs in my research, but who hasn't absently written the wrong date on a check or remembered events out of order when reminiscing years afterward? Our forbearers were prone to similar mistakes of carelessness or faulty memory. Newspapers of the era often yield wonderful descriptions of scenes and events, but they sometimes also contain erroneous or deliberately misleading information, creating bewildering puzzles for novelists like me to sort out decades later.

The historical record is also by its very nature incomplete, especially where intimate conversations and private thoughts are concerned. Whenever I invent such scenes and exchanges for my historical fiction, I do my best to remain true to what I know of the real person while scripting an imagined life to depict all that I don't know.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• Though their friendship eventually soured, Julia and Jule both have fond memories of their childhood together, in spite of the fact that their relationship as mistress and slave was clear even then. What do you think of this childhood friendship, given their positions? If Julia and Jule had met under different circumstances, do you think they would have been friends?

• What do you think of the years Jule refuses to marry Gabriel, worrying that she will be forced to leave with Julia when she marries? Had this been the case, do you think it would have lessened the hurt of separation?

• Grant and his family are staunch abolitionists, and Grant the commander of the Union Army, yet Julia refuses to free Jule. How do you think Grant reconciled this behavior and way of thinking with his beloved wife's more admirable qualities?

• What do you think of Julia and Grant's argument after he posts the notice about "the Jews, as a class?" Why do you think Grant, an abolitionist, did not realize that he was condemning an entire race for the sins of individuals? How do you think Julia is able to keep convincing herself that his decree is "not at all the same" as her support of slavery?

• Initially, Julia is proud of Grant for his success but wary of the scrutiny it will bring her, yet she later thrives as First Lady. How has Julia grown and changed by the time Grant takes office?

• Julia and Ulys are initially forbidden to marry but enjoy a respectful, fulfilling, and happy marriage; they decide not to forbid their daughter's marriage and she ends up deeply unhappy, eventually separating from her husband. When Nellie is wary of her own daughter's match, Julia finds a middle ground and tells Nellie not to forbid the marriage, but to express her concerns. What do you think of this advice?

• Julia is accused of wielding too much influence over Grant. In what ways is she able to influence him, and in what ways does she fail to do so? Do you think this was for better or for worse?

• Near the end of her life, one of Julia's dearest friends is Varina Davis, the widow of the Confederate president. Although their friendship fascinates the press and the public, Julia finds nothing extraordinary about it, as "they were both Southern women raised in slaveholding families. They had both been public figures by virtue of marriages to prominent gentlemen.... They both enjoyed writing...They had both been criticized for allegedly wielding too much influence over their husbands, and they had both experienced the terrible war from a close, intense, and unique perspective." Do you think they could still have become friends if Julia had been raised as an abolitionist in the North?

• Ultimately, Julia believes that her and Ulys's story was a love story, yet Grant's memoirs barely mention Julia at all. Why do you think Grant left out so many familial details in his memoirs?

• Though there are opportunities, Julia and Jule never meet again after Jule leaves Julia at the train station. Do you believe Jule when she says she doesn't need Julia's apology? What do you think the women would have said to each other if they had met again?