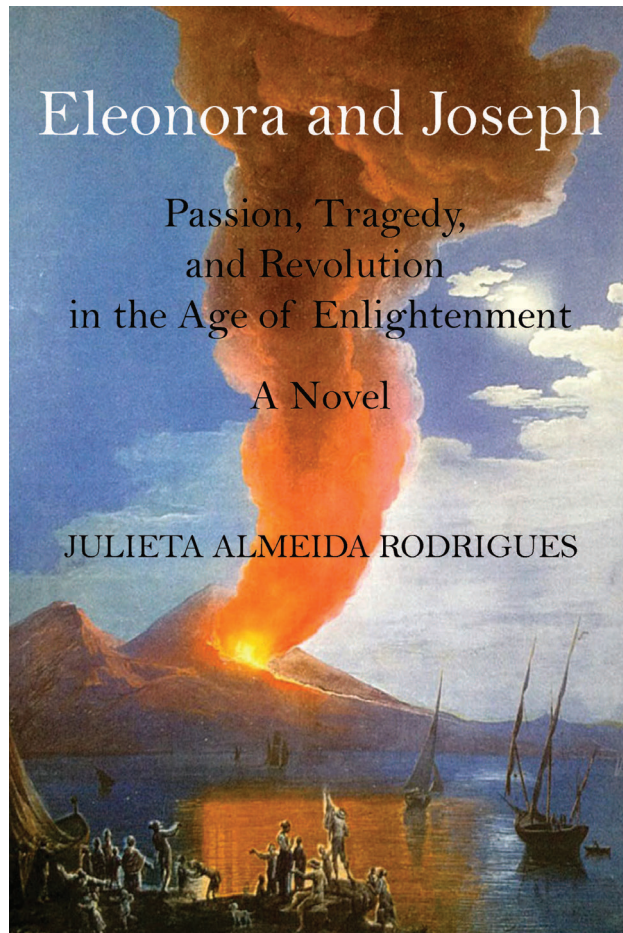


A Portuguese Novelist Who Writes in English

Portuguese author Julieta Almeida Rodrigues wrote her new historical novel *Eleonora and Joseph: Passion, Tragedy, and Revolution in the Age of Enlightenment* in English. Gail Spilsbury interviews Rodrigues on the years it took to research and write the book—on both sides of the Atlantic.



GS: Given that your previous books of short fiction are contemporary, what inspired you to write a historical novel, and how was that process different for you?

JR: I feel I had to get a few things out of the way, so to speak, before I was able to write a novel. I needed to write my short stories about Soviet Russia, a period in history we will never see again. I left the Soviet Union in 1986 with my ex-husband, a diplomat, after nearly three years in the country. Afterward, in Lisbon, where I'm from, I almost threw out the nine hundred pages of notes I had jotted down while there. In retrospective, I'm very happy I didn't do that. These Russian stories, titled *On the Way to Red Square* (2006), are both personal and societal. I have a doctorate in both sociology and education from Columbia University, and I always look at reality from the viewpoint of sociology.

A few years after my Russian stories, I wanted to better understand Portugal, the country where I was born, raised, and primarily educated. Catholic countries tend to be hypocritical, and I wanted to leave behind a testimony of that hypocrisy. This led to my second volume of stories, *The Rogue and Other Portuguese Stories* (2014).

Ideas are like cherries in a bowl, and before I finished writing the Portuguese stories, I was reading Peter Gray's *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*. I kept thinking: Gee, this is powerful. Gray's book convinced me that the Enlightenment was the most fascinating period in human history. I felt inspired to write something with that period as the backdrop. Thus, my new book, *Eleanora and Joseph*, gave me the opportunity to learn something that truly enthralled me.

The decision was the easy part. The work that lay ahead was immense. I wanted to address a period that fascinated me, but of which I knew very little. So, I read for years. The reading brought me to the American Founding Fathers and the French Revolution. In 2013, I attended a conference at the Chawton House Library in the United Kingdom, titled *Women's Writing in the Long Eighteenth Century*, which included a focus group on female biography as a feminist praxis. By then I had already chosen the two protagonists for my novel, prominent Portuguese figures in the Southern European Enlightenment—Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel and Abbé Joseph Correia da Serra. A lot is known about the Northern European Enlightenment but less about its southern side. At the conference, I spoke about Eleonora and her contribution to the revolutionary newspaper *Il Monitore Napoletano*. As a result, I was invited to be a visiting scholar at the New School in New York, not just once, but twice. (continued)

My time in New York was invaluable, for I was able to explore my character Correia's long-term friendship with Thomas Jefferson. The prolific correspondence between the two men has been published, and Jefferson became my third main character. I also joined a group of writers who belonged to the Historical Novel Society, and soon after we began opening our meetings to professionals helpful to our goals—literary agents, editors, publishers, copyright attorneys, and so forth. In New York, during the academic year, I found a stimulating environment where I could write without pause. In the summers, I went home to Portugal and continued working. In many ways, I feel a traitor to my calling, the short story, for it has always been my preferred literary genre. It is, for me, the *filet mignon* of literature; there is nothing like a Chekhov or a Flannery O'Connor story. However, undertaking the novel, I felt curious to explore my mind in another way—leap into the adventure of something bigger, larger than how I had expressed myself up until then.

GS: Why did you write the book (and your short stories) in English?

JR: I started writing in English when I was a PhD student at Columbia. I already knew the language from my schooling in Portugal. Later, I married an American diplomat and we spoke English at home. At our postings in foreign countries, we attended many diplomatic events, and I got to meet people from those cultures and learn about their country—an amazing opportunity, and also an opening up of my own interior world. Generally, I was living in an English-speaking environment, and English became the language with which I felt most comfortable. We also had a son, whose first language was English.

It would have been impossible for me to do the writing I've done the past decades had I remained in Lisbon. I was a university professor there, after my PhD and before my marriage. I enjoyed teaching and the dialogues with students, but the career is demanding and leaves little outside time for one's imagination. One of the things I love about writing full-time is the freedom of my working day. The mind needs that space for the creativity that goes into writing books.

One of the reasons writing in English has been so much fun for me, is the possibility of reinventing myself—an idea at the core of Jefferson's "American Society," albeit more difficult to achieve today than before. For someone who writes in a non-native language, an excellent editor is a requisite. Such an editor understands, at a profound level, what the writer means when, perhaps, a word choice or a phrase isn't how the native speaker would express it. Such an editor is also a translator—a translator of intention.

We will see what the future brings. I am toying with the thought of writing my next project in Portuguese. I have an idea for a book that again deals with the Enlightenment—a particular historical event in Portugal that has been told many times over, but in a misleading way. I would like to set the record straight, and sometimes fiction does that better than history. Think of Barbara Chase-Riboud's novel, *Sally Hemings*. She revealed for the first time, before the DNA proof, that Sally Hemings was Thomas Jefferson's mistress and most probably the mother of some of his children. In her afterword to the book, in the anniversary edition, we read how those in charge of a person's legacy—in Chase-Riboud's case Jefferson's—try to damage your reputation if you dare to contradict the established historical record.

If I write this new book, I'd like to use Agatha Christie's approach in *Murder on the Orient Express*. I want to use several voices recounting the same historical event. This technique will leave only one possible conclusion: the established truth is highly questionable. As a consequence, the current historical record will, most certainly, be revised once and for all. (continued)

GS: What was the best part of writing *Eleanora and Joseph* for you? And the worst?

JR: The best part of writing the book, as any writer will tell you, is the writing itself. The freedom the process gives you, and living in the imagined realm. My first moments of writing a new book are moments of elation. After this initial period, much of writing is a process of rewriting, which requires a lot of patience.

The most difficult part of writing this book was integrating the story with the history. I had an original idea, a plot, characters, and settings both in Europe and America. But the history was always taking precedence over the story. I needed to figure out how to tell the story in view of all the research I had done. One day, during a discussion of my book in my New York writing group, one of my colleagues said he had counted more than twelve historical figures in one single chapter. We all had a good laugh, myself included. It took me a while to figure out the process, which was to tell the story with the history as the background. My next historical novel is going to be much easier to write.

GS: You also came up with great literary devices for this particular tale—one of them reminded me of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and how discovering an relic from someone's past (Hester's red letter) led to uncovering the story. During the five or six years you worked on the book, did anything change for you, such as your stroke of genius inventing Pimentel's memoir, which turns up in Jefferson's library, igniting the story?

JR: A lot changed for me. Writing gave me a great deal of self-knowledge. How else to describe this? You write, ultimately, to get to know your characters, and along the way, through them, you learn about yourself in myriad ways. There are also interesting surprises that come up. My novel is at the intersection of narrative, memoir, and biography. By the time I finished writing the book, the figure I enjoyed most was Thomas Jefferson, his complexities and genius. He was flawed, like any human being, but he was also a remarkable man. His *Declaration of Independence* shaped America, and the world, in a way that only a few people in history have done. I loved the aspect of his character that masters his own silences. He strikes me as a man full of contradictions—someone called him a sphinx—with a brilliant, visionary mind.

All along, I also knew that Pimentel had been a remarkable woman. She's a sad character, but stands as an example of the best virtues the eighteenth century cultivated. As we read her memoir—the fictional memoir I created for her—we see how she was true to herself, to her principles, and to her revolutionary ideas. Whether or not she was a feminist is not the issue in this book. Feminism is a twentieth-century concept, and she lived two centuries before that. Surprisingly, I didn't like Correia da Serra as much as I had anticipated. This was somewhat disappointing, because he is revered in Portuguese-American circles. He was not only a distinguished botanist, but also a close friend of Jefferson. Not many Portuguese can claim such an illustrious friendship across the Atlantic Ocean. As I went along in my research, I found Correia's character so devious and deceitful that, at times, I was embarrassed for him. Being Portuguese, I knew where he was coming from, but that didn't excuse him. He was also a priest, and this might have had a bearing on my interpretation of his life.

As for my literary devices—the discovery of Pimentel's memoir that gives rise to alternating chapters for the two protagonists in their own voices—it was the writing itself, not the research, that decided this approach. The material I had collected needed to be there, but in the background, not the foreground. I struggled with this issue, but eventually realized that alternating the chapters between Pimentel and Correia was the way I could best present the plot. A book, a good book, is a (continued)

coherent whole, and I needed to find a way to have a present and a past in this historical novel. Thus, the double narrative served the plot's purpose. Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel is telling her story in the form of a memoir at the end of her life. She's in prison, facing probable execution, and decides to reflect on what turned her into a revolutionary. She had to go back in time in order to do this, starting with the memory of attending the funeral of Correia's mother in Naples. This encounter establishes the first link between the characters and their separate narratives. I then had to find a way to contrast her life with Correia's. In my story, the dialogues between Correia and Thomas Jefferson embody the present time. Here, my question was: What happens to Correia da Serra with the passage of time? He becomes more conservative, so I had to find a way to show this. I chose his dialogues with Jefferson, as they discuss Pimentel together, to elucidate this point. As Correia and Jefferson always meet in Monticello, I used Correia's views on slavery and his position as the ambassador from the Kingdom of Portugal and Brazil to monitor his intellectual development. The fun part of the book was to have several events told from either Pimentel or Correia's point of view. It is just like our own lives—few people have the same recollection of an event.

I loved writing those scenes from different viewpoints. It was like examining a life that had been lived twice. This is why I say that writing is all about self-knowledge. You use characters to debate the ideas that are in your mind. The challenge is to make the debates real, plausible. If you succeed, the book will be a success. I tried to stick to the history as closely as I found it. But this is, somehow, a detail, and the reason I chose not to include a bibliography in the novel. The best history, as much as the best literature, uses the imagination. Just think of a history book like *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* by Simon Schama. It is much more than a collection of facts and historical events. It's an interpretation that, even if faulty, clarifies reality.

GS: At what age did you start writing stories, and who have been your mentors along the way—living or through literature?

JR: I wish I could tell you I started constructing stories in my mind at the age of five! No, it wasn't this way. I lived a life, and then I started writing. I loved reading as a child, and my father had a great library that I devoured. But I never envisioned becoming a writer, until the day I sat at my desk and filled pages. I like to use a computer, and the way I can move around a line, a sentence, or a paragraph. They say "cancer is a turning point." In my early forties, I had cancer, as well as a small son. I didn't want to die, and I knew that I needed to contemplate what I wanted to do next in order to build a good life. I had wanted to find something new and engaging that fulfilled me. And I realized that my two greatest needs were easily achieved and equally precious: one was silence and the other was having solitude. Virginia Wolf, of course, knew all about this. I found friends with similar interests to mine. These friends had authenticity, cultivated the truths that escape most human beings, and had the courage to think outside of the box. Writing is a lonely road—and a most treasured road! It fulfills the soul.

For more information about *Eleonora and Joseph: Passion, Tragedy, and Revolution in the Age of Enlightenment* visit the author's website, julietaalmeidarodriguesauthor.com, or New Academia Publishing, <http://www.newacademia.com>.