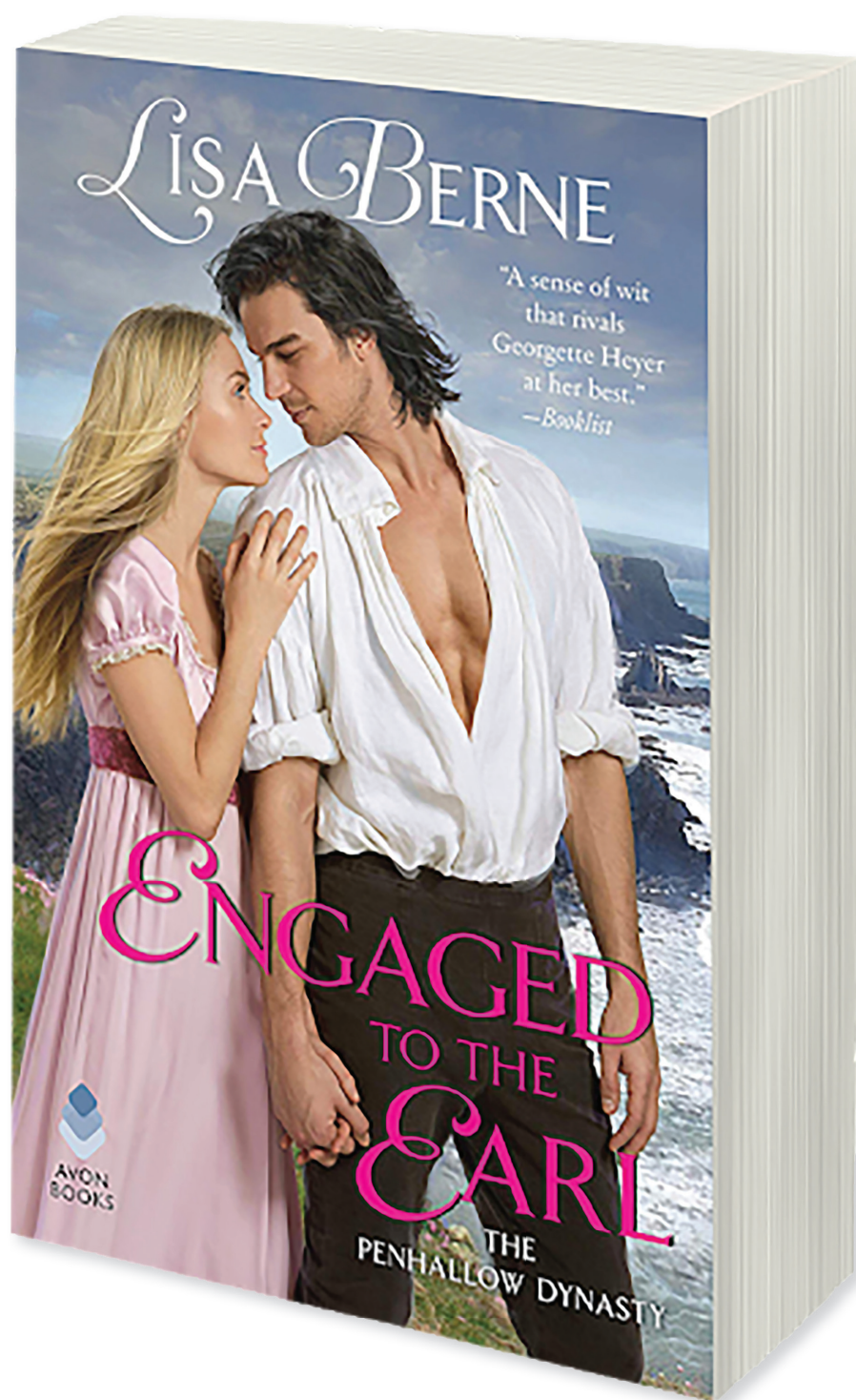




Engage yourself to a regency romance



Over the years, this book reviewer has developed a reputation as a cur-mudgeonly sort when it comes to romance novels. So imagine my astonishment when I picked up “Engaged to the Earl,” the fourth book in Spokane author Lisa Berne’s Penhallow Dynasty series, and found myself devouring it like a plateful of bonbons. Nary a cynical thought crossed my mind. Not one dismissive “harrumph” passed my lips.

“Engaged to the Earl” is an extravagant confection of a book. Set in the Regency period, it is amusing, detailed and lively.

From the very first word, you’ll think you know who the love interest is. In fact, to save her family — which is equipped with an illustrious heritage but a dire economic outlook — Gwennie Penhallow forthrightly proposes marriage to her surly but convenient neighbor, Christopher Beck. Granted, she is only 14, and Christopher — her friend’s older brother — has just been kicked out of school for fighting.

Fortunately for all involved, a more suitable solution manifests and Gwennie’s ill-conceived plan does not go forward. The succeeding chapter provides a cheerful gloss of the next six years, during which Gwendolyn has a chance to grow up, see a bit of the world and rethink her romantic prospects.

In spring of 1818, she is 20 years old. When the dreamy Earl of Westbury singles her out at a London ball, she recalls, it is “Love at first sight. Inexplicable, indefinable, practically indescribable. Yet there it was.”

Despite what our heroine professes, and fortunately for readers, Berne describes in lavish detail the heady society atmosphere of carriage rides, tea parties, strolls in the park and society dances — all of the romantic opportunities available to nobility during the Regency era.

As effortless as Gwendolyn makes her courtship sound, don’t think that there aren’t unanticipated complexities and conniving characters. Be alert for subtext and subterfuge, false flattery and unsettling evidence of one of those psychological complexes that the Greeks so aptly described about 2,500 years ago.

There’s also the matter of good chemistry.

This Week’s Book

‘Engaged to the Earl’ by Lisa Berne

Avon Books — 384 pp — \$7.99

This is all revisionist Regency, of course — it’s gratifying that so many women are empowered to indulge their expansive imaginations, develop their talents and find their true loves. The heroines of Jane Austen’s novels simply counted themselves lucky to make a love match to a man of means.

Fans of the earlier books in the Penhallow series will be glad to see that some of those characters come back into play in “Engaged to the Earl.” There also are new and important friendships that flower.

This is a tale that honors principled living, kindness and authenticity — a combination Gwendolyn describes as “congruent.”

If you want a story that will make you chuckle, swoon and generally feel warm-hearted, “Engaged to the Earl” fills the bill.

If this book leaves you wanting more, the next book in the series, “The Worst Duke in the World,” is due in bookstores later this year.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlink.com.