

# The gleeful fantasy of historical romance

Publishing veteran KJ Charles pits a prickly con artist against a shopkeeper with a heart of gold in a delightful addition to her lineup of morally gray leading men.

"A blank page is a very daunting thing. If you give me an 80,000-word manuscript, I can make it a good book," says British author KJ Charles, whose favorite part of writing is revision. This shouldn't come as a surprise, given that Charles worked as an editor for Mills & Boon, a British publisher of romantic fiction. When faced with publishing deadlines, she remembers trawling through slush piles for that diamond in the rough and reminds herself that "I know how to make things better." It's a statement that holds more gravity than it seems at first blush. *Escapism* feels too shallow of a word and *therapeutic* too clinical, but in her work, Charles peddles in catharsis and hope.

Charles' books—all 30+ of which, including her latest, **How to Fake It in Society**, are historical—often come with descriptors like charming, comforting, rompy. All are apt. Thanks, perhaps, to that focus on editing, her novels are consistent in their enjoyability. To read a book by Charles is to be transported to a place where things feel *better*. "A good romance is not just about two people falling in love," she says. "It's about how their relationship has helped them both become better, stronger people."

That's not to say that Charles shies away from ugliness. Her books are known for featuring morally gray main characters, which she uses to examine the virtues of what makes a romantic hero. Not to mention that they are simply just more fun to write. "You can never be quite sure what they'll do next," she says, interjecting that it's also "damnedably hard" to move a plot when you have characters who always do the right thing. "It's not quite human nature either, is it?" Charles quips.

Nicolas-Marc, Comte de Valois de La Motte, is a delightful addition to Charles' morally questionable lineup of heroes. As **How to Fake It in Society** opens, Nico is a swindler searching for an easy mark, spinning wild tales about his history in the hopes some poor, bleeding heart will take pity on a roguish but ultimately wronged man. The reality is that his very large debt has come due, and failing to pay up will mean dangerous and quite deadly consequences. Charles fondly describes him as a stray cat who barges in and has no problem overstaying his welcome.

Luckily for Nico, Titus Pilcrow is the type of man who can't say no to a person in need. The shopkeeper and paintmaker is on the verge of losing both his home and his business when a home delivery to an eccentric, elderly client upends his life. It is Miss Whitecross's dying wish to keep her money out of the hands of her undeserving

nephew, so Titus agrees to become her husband, leaving him with an unexpected fortune.

Charles knew early on that the growth of Titus' character would be tied to his financial windfall. Up until he marries Miss Whitecross, the entirety of Titus' life has been full of people who take advantage of his time, his energy, his money and his love, and because of his precarious financial and social status, there's not much he can do about it. "You'd have to be a much stronger person from the start to decide how people treat you when you're on the verge of bankruptcy," Charles says.

Titus soon learns that with money comes strength and eventually begins to understand the agency he now has in determining the relationships around him. As Charles writes, "He was becoming someone who decided how he let people treat him, and he felt a fierce pride in that, along with a certain embarrassment it had taken him to the age of thirty-one."

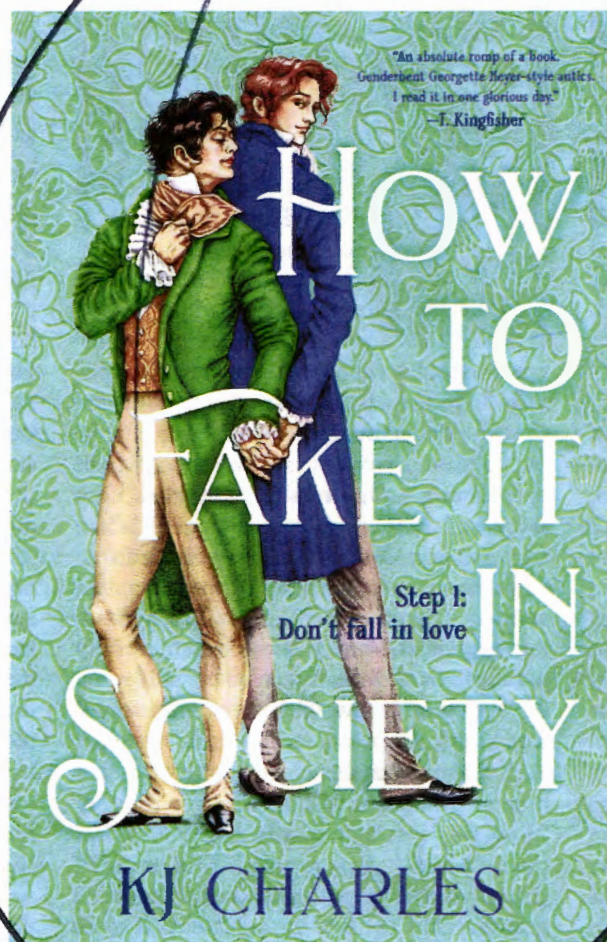
Despite his change in status, Titus is starved for genuine connection, a disastrous quality for someone suddenly rich and thrust into high society. Nico offers his help in navigating these waters, while hiding his ulterior motives. Of the pair, Charles says, "They were enormous fun to write because they're both in a bit of shambles, but they do each other good."

When creating Titus and Nico, and characters in general, Charles says there's rarely a detail that emerges first, describing it as a "push me, pull you" process. She knew early on that Titus was meant to be an artisan with his own business and no social safety net, rather than, say, a duke "who doesn't do anything all day and must become a spy or a smuggler or both to fill his time." Then came the research into paint-making, which she found both staggering and appalling,

given "how absolutely disgusting the process of making paint was on so many levels."

Nico's own history was born from the astonishing true story of the so-called "Affair of the Diamond Necklace," where a conwoman, through forged letters and clandestine meetings, tricked a cardinal into purchasing a diamond necklace for Marie Antoinette to regain her favor. Instead, the conwoman made off with the necklace herself.

Once these—or any—two romantic leads meet and build a relationship, Charles stresses the importance of what she calls the "proof stage." As in baking, where dough needs to rise, a couple must rise to the occasion of conflict. In romance, that often means a third-act breakup, but that's not the only option, Charles explains. Some event,



★ **How to Fake It in Society**  
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**HISTORICAL ROMANCE**