

Lafayette, Moraga – Monte Veda??

By Jennifer Wake



Author Jessica Barksdale Inclán

If you pick up one of Jessica Barksdale Inclán's novels, you not only become engrossed in her characters, but recognize the area, whether it is Nation's down from the Orinda Theatre or the Lafayette Cemetery. Initially setting her first novel in the Seattle area – a place she says she knew nothing about – Inclán's agent told her the setting was weak. So in 2001, Inclán, at age 39, published *Her Daughter's Eyes*, the first of nine novels she has published since – and one of many set in Orinda.

"I gave [the town] the name Monte Veda (a street in Orinda off of Moraga Way)," said Inclán, who lived in Orinda all her life until she graduated from Miramonte in 1980 (and later returned to raise her family in 1999). "I felt like I had to protect the area for some reason, but I realized I didn't need to do that fully. I didn't do it for the reader, but really for the story. I was able to give a lot of texture to the tale because of knowing so much about the area."

Despite the local connection, it is Inclán's ability to develop the complex, often flawed and truly believable characters that draw you into each of her stories. As her characters face daunting

circumstances including overcoming the shame of teenage motherhood, the lies surrounding anorexia, or the complexities of child abandonment, you find yourself immersed in her character's lives.

Building on the success of her novels, Inclán was ready to write more, but her agent told her that publishing houses would only accept one book a year of contemporary fiction.

"He suggested I write a romance, but I hadn't even read a romance since my last Danielle Steel in high school," said Inclán, who teaches composition, creative writing, mythology and women's literature at Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill. She also teaches online courses for UCLA extension and regularly facilitates workshops at writer's conferences throughout the country.

Not one to refuse a challenge, Inclán began to research the genre, reading one hundred romance novels before beginning one of her own. She decided to write a trilogy of unique romance novels; she included the paranormal in the plot so there could be an alternate world she could write about.

"Just because it's romance doesn't mean it can't be fun," she said. "It's like Harry Potter for adults – with sex." But she says she is not into elaborate sex scenes, adding, "I don't want to write erotica."

Much like her earlier contemporary fiction, Inclán's books continue to focus on the story, the characters and the emotional romance – what people want, what they feel. In her recent novel, *Believe in Me*, the third in her trilogy about the magical world of the Croyant de Trois – a world of sorcerers, evil and intrigue – Inclán continues to develop characters that draw you in.

"I like to pull from life, where it starts as a germ of truth. I pull from emotional truth, and then the characters start doing stuff that takes me somewhere else," she said. "If I get the char-

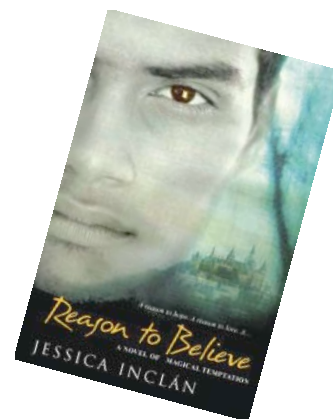
acters going, they'll pretty much tell the story. With romance, I'm anticipating the tension and I sort of let it happen."

But her success does not go without reproach. After her first romance novel was published, one of Inclán's long-time fans in Georgia wrote her a pleading letter. "She hoped I would hurry up and get back to my 'normal' writing," Inclán said.

"There is a stigma with romance book writers, but genre writing is genre writing," Inclán explained. "The other books I wrote didn't sell as well as the romances are selling. Mystery writing follows a format, same as romance, but there aren't multiple bookshelves dedicated to romance. Yet I see people leaving bookstores, their baskets filled with romance novels."

For now, Inclán is enjoying this new genre and – her Georgia fan aside – the public is backing her up. She recently created a class entitled, "Writing and Selling a Romance Novel."

"It's already filled," she said. For information about Inclán, her books, workshops offered or to sign up for her quarterly newsletter, visit her website at www.jessicabarksdaleinclan.com



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