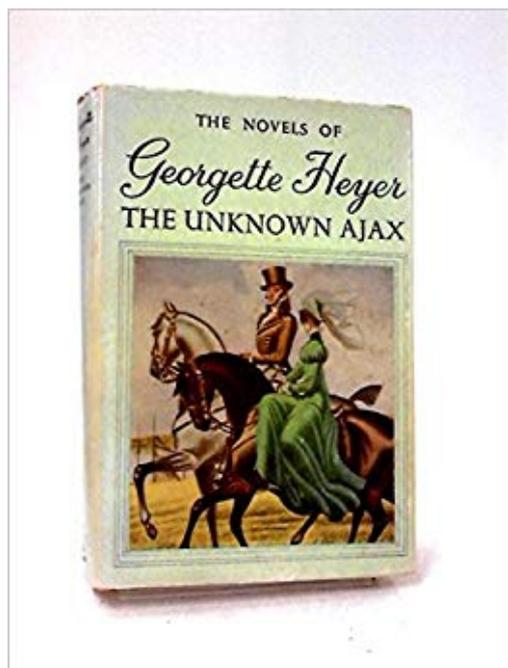


The Unknown Ajax *by* Georgette Heyer



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Reviews of the *The Unknown Ajax* by Georgette Heyer

Nidor

Difficult, unwieldy and seemingly authentic Regency Era vernacular, especially the Yorkshire patois of Hugo, aka Ajax, combined with the introduction of a slew of characters both living and dead made the beginning of Unknown Ajax confusing to the point of frustration. In fact, at about page 40, I was ready to throw in the towel. I am so glad that I didn't.

What unfolds in Unknown Ajax is a story of such humor and slow, but smoldering relationship building between Hugo and our heroine, Anthea that the effort of wading through long-winded, unfamiliar and slang-filled speeches is tedious but worth the effort. Ms. Heyer's characterizations are excellent and very nontypical. Hugo is the embodiment of the 'if accused, I'll be obligingly guilty'

school of paybacks. Anthea is pleasant looking, but no great beauty. She is however, spunky in her unwillingness to be any one's doormat. Our H/h are supported by a host of interesting secondary characters: the blustering, controlling Grandpapa, the sweet, handwringing dependent daughter-in-law, a trio of grandsons, one foppish, one grimly mocking and cynical and the youngest who is intelligent and high-spirited, but cosseted and bored. It is the youngest grandson who is the focus of much of the action of the story and it is his antics that provide the tension leading to the climax and eventual HEA.

It took me a bit, but I loved these characters and this story. Hugo is a man to be depended upon, Anthea is worth knowing and their coming together was old-school romance at its best. Secondary characters begin as caricatures, but are allowed to develop and become much more than they were in the beginning. The novel's final scene is both comedic and tension filled. It only lacks stage direction to be considered stage ready.

Hugo's and Anthea's story is filled with subtle, sophisticated humor and is populated by relatable characters acting in a period correct conflict. Unknown Ajax is worth the considerable early effort before you find yourself hooked. Happy reading!

Braned

This book is such fun! Sudden inheritances, passed-over family members with knives drawn, dandies, butlers, smugglers and bumbling Excise men - there's something for everyone. The title is a joke, a line from one of Shakespeare's worst plays, *Troilus and Cressida*. Heyer uses it well, to get plays on words. The mythological hero Ajax was a bruiser of a giant, a great warrior in the *Iliad*. But in *Troilus and Cressida* he's a brawny buffoon, "beef-witted," "vainglorious," etc. An assumption that drives the action.

The story takes place at Darracott Place, ancestral home of His Lordship, which is all they ever call him, that or "grandfather." His rank is only mentioned once, I think a baron. His pride in his lineage, going back before the Conqueror, is mentioned constantly. He had a gaggle of children, including five sons, making for lots of aunts, uncles and cousins. Some of them live there, because they haven't got enough money to live anywhere else. This includes the kindly Mrs. Darracott, widow of one of his sons, and her children, Richmond and Anthea. The teenaged Richmond is the only one in his family His Lordship adores. He can't stand the rest of them. When his eldest son Granville is killed in a boating accident along with his own son Oliver, His Lordship explodes with rage instead of grief. Next in line after Granville was his son Hugh, who fell in love with a Yorkshire girl and enraged his father by marrying her. He was disowned, and has since died. The legitimate heir is now the unknown grandson His Lordship contemptuously calls "the weaver's son," when he mentions him at all. This is going to be a cousins war, and what's astonishing is that, with her deft hand, Heyer not only keeps them all straight, she makes them come alive.

Now comes the fun, with the appearance of Major Hugo Darracott, late of the 95th Rifles. An Ajax, a giant of a warrior. He already has two marks against him, his common mother and his Yorkshire origins. It sounds strange, but in Regency Britain, big and tall wasn't exactly embraced. Dainty girls with golden curls were the ideal, in dippy period songs and poems, "sixty inches high," "her head no higher than my heart." Tall girls could have a rough coming out, and were often wallflowers. I think Georgette Heyer probably suffered over this. I haven't read her biography yet, but she was a Long Meg, five-feet ten, I think, with unique features like Vanessa Redgrave. Feels like she's getting a little of her own back. And it was a problem for men, too. Being a "giant," poor Hugo gets a double helping of negative expectations. The old-blood families of the south looked askance at "hulking" Scots and Yorkshiremen they perceived as beneath them. From the time Hugo walks into the house,

dangerously late for the dinner His Lordship demands at six o'clock, everyone from the supercilious butler to his grandfather treats him like a driveling idiot who grew up in a hovel. Hugo is easygoing by nature, and he loves a joke. He quickly decides that the best way to get under their skin is to put on a thick Yorkshire brogue, look dumb and act stupid. Then wait for them to step in it, again and again, which they obligingly do.

His Lordship has franked Anthea for one London season, and when she didn't get a wedding out of it, he decides to marry her off to Hugo, to bring him up to snuff and help control him. It's a nice little romance, but there's lots more going on. This book really sparkles in its characters. Two main ones are cousins to Hugo, two battling brothers, Vincent and Claud. Vincent is a flash Corinthian, and Claud is a riot. It's a character Heyer has written before, but I don't think it was ever this funny, the dim-witted dandy, light on brains, desperate to become a Pink of the Ton by coming up with a new fashion craze. The brothers bring with them their two battling valets, the unforgettable Crimplesham and Polyphant. They'd knife each other if they could get away with it. Modern readers sometimes complain about a lack of characters out of the servants quarters, but I don't think this is what they had in mind. These two have more pride and vanity than any of the Darracotts, and they play incessant power games against each other above and below stairs, trying to gain a place with the new heir. It's a hoot, as brilliant as anything Wodehouse wrote.

The story is fast-moving and funny, with a clever ending that's very cinematic. Surprising twists make for improbable allies and a pageant of antic situations that are Heyer at her absolute best. And Hugo, of course, pulls all the strings, while pulling everyone's fat out of the fire. He's so lovable that Anthea gives up and falls for him, in the expected but still satisfying happy ending. A winner all the way.

Beanisend

I can't pick which of Georgette Heyer's books is the best, but surely the ending of this book must take the prize for being the most inventive. Somehow, she contrives to bring a very fractious family together by having them take dramatic roles as in a play. And, as the reader slowly learns, one person is acting not at all like himself until the end of the story.

At first, you may not like the Darracott's very much, particularly the patriarch. Wait until the new heir arrives, Hugo Darracott -- the son of the scapegrace of the family. He has never met the rest of his family, and Hugo, having grown up in Yorkshire, is considered to be a country bumpkin by his poor, but land wealthy family. Hugo decides to live up to their low expectations of him while he finds out if it is worth his while to help sort out the finances and fractured relations in the family. Hugo is large, funny, and ultimately smarter than all the Darracotts put together.

You may want to get the sound recording of this book to help you understand some of the Yorkshire accent that is a little hard to penetrate on the page. But, you will fall in love with Hugo either listening to him or reading his dialogue with his family. Lots of action, humor, and a fun romance -- what more could you ask for!

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