



A Humble Companion

Laurie Graham

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Nellie Welche is the daughter of a high-ranking steward in the household of Prinnie, Prince of Wales. In 1788, at the age of twelve, she's proposed as a suitably humble companion to Princess Sophia, one of George III's enormous brood of children. Nellie and Sofy become friends for life. From the first rumblings of revolution in France to the exciting, modern times of gas light and steam trains, from poor mad George to safe and steady Victoria, Nellie is the sharp-penned narrator of a changing world and the unchanging, cloistered lives of Princess Sofy and her sisters. Nellie proves to be more a hawk-eyed witness than a Humble Companion, as her memoir lifts the lid on the House of Hanover's secrets and lies.

A Humble Companion Details

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From Reader Review A Humble Companion for online ebook

P.D.R. Lindsay says

‘A Humble Companion’ is an enjoyable and less usual style of historical novel. It’s an ‘insider’ novel where an outsider becomes part of a well known real historical group and tells us their story. Poor ordinary Nellie is a character the reader quickly warms to and her observations and dry wit make for excellent and humourous reading. She has plenty to observe, her position as the outsider, way out of her social world, gives the reader a very different view of King George III and his family life.

In 1788 Nellie Welche is the daughter of the Prince Regent’s steward. Quick and lively, she should have a promising future in the 18th C style, a husband and happy home. But poor Nellie was born with a port wine birthmark on her face. Her father therefore teaches her tricks of his trade and it is when she is with him in Brighton that she meets the Prince Regent. The Prince decides she might be a suitable companion for Princess Sophia, the youngest of his sisters, a way of entertaining and teaching the neglected princess about ordinary people and their lives.

Sophia’s father is mad King George III but Nellie’s observations show that his madness is just one of the difficulties plaguing the lives of the royal family. Really, and Nellie observes this with dry wit and a sense of the comic which makes the reader laugh, the entire family is nutty. The princes are vile and peculiar, the poor princesses have such a deadly dull life ruled by their peculiar mother and mad father. Nellie had an idea that princesses had gay lives, lots of parties, wonderful gowns, marble palaces for homes and handsome princes visiting, eager for marriage. Not so, their lives are more boring than Nellie’s home life. Restricted by their mother, Queen Charlotte, and their father’s refusal to consent to their marriages, Nellie shows us theirs is a sad life, particularly for her princess. Nellie has a kind heart as well as a great sense of humour. She forms a friendship with the King and values Sohpia and their friendship but, because she has an independent life of her own, she isn’t afraid to tell her friend, dear Sofy, unpalatable truths where others won’t.

The book covers Nellie’s life from the time she becomes a royal companion until her death. We see the royal family and the contrast of Nellie’s family. The contrast between Nellie’s world, especially after she marries, and the enclosed royal world is marked but Nellie does meet Fanny Burney, novelist and attendant to Queen Charlotte. Nellie has always wanted to write and Fanny Burney encourages her with excellent advice. Of course the greatest book she writes is about Sophia.

Full marks to Laurie Graham for her research, and her handling of the historical information without dumping it on the reader in boring lumps. She has created a ‘real’ world for the reader and a fascinating one at that.

Jane says

I enjoy reading Laurie Graham's books, each one of them is vastly different from the others and she tackles subjects from Wallis Simpson to cross dressing with aplomb. A Humble Companion is is about Charles III's family of 15 children and in particular his daughter Sofy and her 'humble companion' Nellie who tells the story. It is an entertaining look at this period of English history from the Napoleonic wars, the French

revolution and the start of the Industrial Revolution. I learnt a lot from Laurie Graham's book about these 'royalties' and thoroughly enjoyed the telling.

Sahra says

Not bad, however at many times it comes dangerously close to sounding like a history textbook. The most interesting parts were those of Nellie recounting her life rather than the lives of the Royal family. I also found myself struggling to remember who all the characters were and I was quite often flipping back and getting confused as there were probably at least 3 new character additions every chapter and most of them shared similar names. Overall not bad but not great: I wouldn't recommend it though

Catherine Holmes says

a good book, interesting but about 50 pages too long.

Kate North says

This one was great. A historical novel about the (fictional) "Humble Companion" (i.e. ordinary (not noble) girl engaged to be a friend to) of Princess Sofia, Daughter of George III (not fictional). The lives of the many, many members of George III's family are portrayed fairly accurately, as far as I can tell, including some of the more surprising parts, though of course all the encounters with Nellie, the companion, are made up. The book also explores Nellie's own life away from The Royalties, as she refers to them, as a woman of the era - a relatively well-off one, as these things go, but still very much a woman of the people. The history is very interesting and the characters brilliantly drawn (the family has so much colour, it's not really necessary to invent much - one of those cases where truth is as strange as or stranger than anything one could make up), with the humour and lightness of touch you'd expect from Laurie Graham, for whom this is a departure - more serious in some ways than things like The Unfortunates or Dog Days, Glenn Miller Nights.

Rachel says

I always look forward to a new Laurie Graham novel, and loved this one. Graham has written historical fiction before, but never gone so far back in time, and has found a rich seam to mine. "Mad" King George's large family, are viewed by Nellie via her role as a companion to Princess Sofy. The privilege afforded to the family and their waste of it is the theme that Nellie returns to time after time: waste of money, waste of their time and talents, and carelessness of other's feelings.

We see all this as a modern reader and Nellie is our sharp-witted and astute guide. I enjoyed Nellie's sharp, dry observations of people and life in general. I was sad to finish the book. A recommended read.

Hilary Hicklin says

Laurie Graham has done a clever thing here. Normally a writer of contemporary humorous fiction, she has tried her hand at a historical novel, but instead of using a world peopled by real historical characters, or one which uses a historical backdrop for a cast of fictional characters, she has inserted a fictional character into the real world of the daughters of George III, using all the wit and style of her modern novels. And it works! Who knew what sheltered but scandalous lives they led!

Using the Humble Companion of the title as a close observer of the royal family, Graham creates wonderful portraits of this cast of odd royals (George III had 15 children) and the mental decline of the king himself. But the central story is the scandal surrounding the reputation of Princes Sophie, which Graham explains very plausibly. A good story well told. However I did start to get bored towards the end as the ends inevitably had to be tied up.

Still, I look forward to seeing what this imaginative author does next.

Brenda says

The cover of my bound proof copy said this :- You are cordially invited to spend an evening with A Humble Companion by Laurie Graham to make the acquaintance of Miss Nellie Welche, companion to Royalty and Keeper of Secrets.

How I wish that I could have read it all in just one evening! From page one I was hooked by this story, written as a memoir by the companion of the title but woven around the historical facts of 'the Royalties' during the years 1788-1848 covering the reigns from George III,- The Prince Regent, who became George IV,- William IV- to Queen Victoria.

Nellie is recruited to be an unpaid, part-time, companion to Princess Sophie, daughter of King George III and Queen Charlotte (she had 15 children!), they became good friends and that friendship survives the next 60 years. Along with infidelities, crushes, love and arranged marriages of the Royalties, secrets abound. Both Sofy (as she signs herself) and Nellie carry their own secrets during the course of the story, which they do, in their later years, divulge to one another.

Laurie Graham has woven a work of fiction here that would be so easy to believe is a true story. I have no hesitation in giving 5 stars - Brilliant!

My copy for review by my reading group was provided by the publisher

Mieneke says

In the past, I've made no secret of my love for historical fiction concerning royalty and aristocracy and in fact, Laurie Graham's *A Humble Companion* made my Anticipated Reads post for the first half of this year. What interested me about this novel in particular was the era it dealt with, as the Hanoverian George's are some of the kings in British history I'm least familiar with. To say that I now know lots more about them, would be an exaggeration, but what I did learn more about is the life of Georgian princesses and how limited,

lonely and none too happy their life was.

The life the daughters of King George III led wasn't even close to how you'd imagine a princess' life to be: no endless parties, gorgeous clothes, stunning palaces and princes vying for their hands in marriage. Instead, they lived lives of relative simplicity, restricted in their movements and ruled with an iron hand by their mother, Queen Charlotte, and weren't allowed to marry until they were almost middle-aged. Graham sketches a sad life for her princesses, which despite its security in regards to the necessities of life – food, clothes, shelter – seems to have been a lot less happy than that of their father's subjects. Nellie, the daughter of a successful tradesman who's risen to become steward for the Prince of Wales, seems to be far happier and more free than Sophie could ever dream to be, even if she had been able to escape the clutches of her mother through marriage.

The narrator of the story is Nellie Welche, only child of the Prince of Wales' steward. A smart and surprisingly educated girl, who is cherished by her parents, Nellie has one physical feature that sets her apart, a port-wine stain across one side of her face. Nellie is used to people staring at her because of it, but she never comes across as ashamed of it or insecure because of it. I loved Nellie's tone of voice. She's irreverent, acerbic, humorous and a keen observer, but she is also wise and has a kind heart. I loved the way she lost her awe of the 'Royalties', as she calls them, and sees through their foibles and eccentricities to their humanity. She's very loyal to Sophie, while at the same time very well aware of what she will and won't accept from her. She values their friendship, but isn't afraid to lose her place as Humble Companion and thus tells Sofy truths others won't, something Sophie doesn't always appreciate.

We follow Nellie from about her twelfth year until her death and during this we meet not just most of the royal family, we also meet Nellie's family: her Dutch/German-descended parents, their cook, their manservant, Morphew, who stays with Nellie when she gets married. And later we meet her husband, the orphans they take in and their families. I loved the contrast between Nellie's world which is open and industrious and Sofy's shuttered and insulated existence within the walls of the different royal houses she occupies. The different characters Graham creates for the non-royals in her book are lovely and diverse and I really enjoyed the glimpses of Nellie's life we got. These were far fewer than I would have liked, because in the end this is as much or more Sofy's story as it is Nellie's and most of Nellie's narration focuses on her interactions with Sofy.

And that would be my biggest complaint: Sofy. For most of the narrative she remains rather flat; she is a mousy, quiet girl, snowed under by the stronger personalities of her sisters and it's not quite clear why she'd deserve such devotion from Nellie. Only once we get halfway through the book does she show a more developed spark of personality. At the same time, this is also the point where the friendship between the two becomes quite strained by circumstances best not revealed so as not to spoil the story, so it also means a shift in the relationship. It is only by the end of the book that they truly seem equal in friendship, if not in station, then in feeling and devotion. When going out they seem like any other set of old, grey ladies, albeit that one of them is a little strange in the ways of the real world. The scenes where Sophie finally visits Nellie's house and the confectionery shop she runs with her husband, Jack, were lovely and some of my favourites in the book.

Another recurring thread throughout the story is Nellie's love of writing and her wish to become a published author. The flames of this desire only get fanned when she meets Fanny Burney, one of the first female novelists and attendant to Queen Charlotte. The scenes she and Nellie share are just wonderful and she seems to speak not just to Nellie, but to any budding author. Nellie eventually gets her wish and becomes a published author. But in the end, it seems her greatest writing wasn't to be her fiction, but the commitment to paper of her memories of a princess, her princess, Sofy, Her Royal Highness The Princess Sophia.

A Humble Companion is the tale of a friendship between two unlikely girls. It is a story of loyalty, secrets and the strength of character of its narrator. I found it compelling reading, because of Nellie's wonderful voice and, not least, because of Graham's smooth writing and the fascinating look at the late Hanoverian period. If you enjoy historical fiction centred on royalty or set in British history, *A Humble Companion* is a book well worth reading.

This book was provided for review by the publisher.

Dorothy says

Laurie Graham is a discovery. After reading *Life According to Lubka*, I assumed I knew her style - chick lit with a smart-mouthed, flawed heroine and a prose full of deadly one-liners.

Then I picked up *A Humble Companion*. It's a historical novel, for goodness sake! And she is just as good in this as she was in the comedic *Lubka*.

As I read this, I was reminded of some recent historical novels where the description of setting was good, but - for some reason I couldn't put my finger on - I didn't feel I was "in" the period. No such problems here, and I think most of it was the heroine's voice, which sounded true to the times without being stilted or old-fashioned.

The book does sag towards the end, when there's not much happening in the heroine's life but there's a lot of history going on, and the chapters are at risk of turning into a history lesson. But it's only a temporary lull and the book picks up again at the end.

I'm looking forward to picking up more of Laurie Graham's books!

zespri says

Laurie Graham is better known for writing contemporary comedy, so a leap into historical fiction made for an interesting change.

I have always enjoyed her books, and this was no exception. A bit hard going at first, but once I was familiar with the main character Nellie, I was along for the ride.

Nellie becomes the companion to Sophia, one of King George III's daughters. As such, she sees and hears things not usually aired in the public arena. The behind the scenes look at the house of Hanover is fascinating, and adds a human face to this era of the monarchy.

CuteBadger says

Nellie Welche is a commoner chosen at the age of 12 to be a Humble Companion to Princess Sophia, one of the daughters of George III. The idea is that she will teach the Princess about ordinary life, but in telling us her own and Sophia's life stories it becomes obvious that the commoner learns more about Royal life and

scandal than Royalty learns about commoners.

I loved this book from beginning to end and was really sorry when it was over. Nellie is a wonderful creation who jumps from the page as a real person you'd like to meet. Her astute observations of Royal life are funny and affecting and show that the newspapers' obsession with Palace life is nothing new.

A wonderful and satisfying read.

Vicky says

I learned a lot about the British Royals. The history behind the Hanoverian dynasty is fascinating. The Mad King George and his 15th children are at centre of this book. And what a family they were! Many readers found this book boring, with the main character coming and going, her life entangled with princesses, her presence as a humble companion made her a unique witness to their miserable life. The Royals are dying from boredom and the country being ruled somehow by a bunch of narrow minded simpletons. I lost track of their illegitimate offspring, mistresses and unhappy marriages. At the end it was Queen Victoria who succeeded this sorry bunch

Anita says

It is 1788, and twelve-year-old Cornelia [Nellie] Welche's lives in her comfortable home in Soho, where her father is a high-ranking steward in the household of Prinnie, Prince of Wales. Nellie is mourning the loss of her elder sister, Eliza, manifested in her overeating her father's cakes. The fact that she also suffers from a disfiguring birthmark, does not help her appearance as it attracts both sympathy and derision.

Her world changes forever when her father puts her forward as a companion to the Princess Sophia, the nine-year-old daughter of George III and his wife, Queen Charlotte.

Nellie quickly discovers that not all princesses live in the lap of luxury, nor are their whims always catered to. That being Royal is a euphemism for a unique kind of neglect where uninteresting food and lack of winter fuel is a common occurrence. Nellie is not impressed – and not backward in saying so. She also develops a charming affection for the unfortunate King George, who suffers episodes of the illness that would label him 'Mad'.

The friendship of the lonely princess, runs from the first rumblings of revolution in France to the innovation of gas light and steam trains, from poor mad George to safe and steady Victoria, Nellie is the sharp-penned narrator of a changing world and the unchanging, cloistered lives of Princess 'Sofy' and her sisters.

Nellie is pragmatic about life and people, possibly because she cannot get by on her looks, and she has a sharp wit and a clever way with words which makes this story an entertaining read.

Mirella says

A Humble Companion by Laurie Graham is a novel about the Royal Family between King George III to Queen Victoria. The story begins in 1788. Nellie Welche is a twelve year old girl with a horrible birthmark on her face. She lives a comfortable life home in Soho with her parents. Her father, a chef for the household of the Prince of Wales, suggests to the King that Nellie might make a suitable companion to nine year old Princess Sophia, the daughter of King George III and Queen Charlotte. Nellie is thrust into the oppulent, but restrictive world of the royal children. As the girls grow up together, they experience life together, love, marriage, chidbirth, and death. Nellie soon comes to understand that a privileged, glamorous life as a member of the royal family is not as desirable as she once thought.

Author Laurie Graham skilfully inter-weaves an interesting tale through the turbulence of the 18th century, a time of extreme suffering, restrictions, poverty, and privilege. I thoroughly enjoyed the contrast between Nellie's independence and the restrictions Sofy must learn to live within. This is definitely a character driven novel with a strong vein of historical fact weaven throughout. For this reason, I found the characters and story very believable, informative, and realistic in every way. I especially enjoyed the way the author dealt with King George's fluctuations between madness and coherent stability - respectful and touching, especially how it impacted his wife and family. For anyone who loves novels about the English Royalty who want a factual, realistic portrayal, then this is definitely a book to get. Extremely enjoyable.
