

## A Man of Genius

**Janet Todd**

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Writing can be an act of creation—or destruction. In Janet Todd's *A Man of Genius*, Ann St. Clair is a successful nineteenth century novelist of cheap gothic novels whose life is transformed when she meets the bold, enigmatic Robert James. What starts as a love affair turns into a tumultuous relationship of madness and obsession, and as Ann leaves London to follow Robert to Venice, she discovers more shocking secrets that transform her life into one of the scandalous stories she used to only write about.

*A Man of Genius* jumps into Ann's meeting with Robert, the transformation coming swiftly and irrevocably. At times, the novel seems almost dream-like, as Ann's reality shifts and reconfigures itself after her encounter with the strange but captivating gentleman. "He changed everything," the novel writes, and a series of short scenes help introduce the monumental change that led to the undoing of Ann's former life. Interestingly, though Ann remains the center of the novel, she orients herself almost entirely around Robert James, so that it is impossible to imagine her without this connection to the brooding, violent genius. The implication Todd seems to be making is that in the reality of this novel, the writer Ann cannot create herself independent of Robert James—at least at the beginning.

As the novel goes on, however, Ann begins to discover more about not only Robert, but herself. It is this self-discovery, this uncovering of her own narrative, that finally pushes her into an independent role that is both thrilling and heartbreaking to witness. For Robert James is not the only one with secrets, and Ann's final narrative is dependent on her understanding of her own. This book is recommended for readers who enjoy the twists and turns of a gothic novel with emotional heart and depth.

STEPHANIE BUCKLIN (Summer 2016)

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