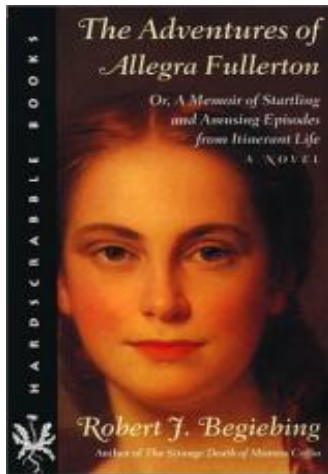


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# The Adventures of Allegra Fullerton: Or, A Memoir of Startling and Amusing Episodes from Itinerant Life-A Novel

by Robert J. Begiebing

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## About the Book

*A picaresque novel of the remarkable life of a liberated 19th-century woman.*

Robert J. Begiebing's first novel, **The Strange Death of Mistress Coffin**, was hailed by Annie Proulx in the *New York Times Book Review* as "a striking and original work by a gifted writer with an extraordinary feeling for the past." Begiebing delivers on the promise of that first book with his new novel, a lively, colorful, and exciting "portrait of the artist as a young woman" set in the early years of the republic.

In **The Adventures of Allegra Fullerton**, Begiebing masterfully conjures the voice and perspective of a young widow in the early 19th century, struggling toward independence and artistic fulfillment in a society unprepared to grant either to a woman. From her "stalking" by a powerful and dissolute young industrialist to her friendship with Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller, another independent-minded woman; from her artistic awakening in Italy, influenced by, among others, a young John Ruskin, to her re-awakened passion as a woman, Allegra Fullerton narrates her story in a voice that is wry, wise, but eternally optimistic.

Begiebing once again demonstrates his masterful command of historical fiction, vividly re-creating another century on the page. The daily life of New England and Italy in the 1830s and 1840s -- especially the circumstances of an itinerant portrait painter and struggling artist -- is rendered in rich and authentic detail. And Allegra's own consciousness is very much the product of her era, even as she struggles constantly to transcend the limited role that society offers her. Infused with picaresque humor and adventure, with meditations on art and freedom, and with the captivating, intelligent voice of Allegra herself, **The Adventures of Allegra Fullerton** is an enjoyable, engrossing novel.

## Discussion Guide

1. Like Hawthorne's **The Scarlet Letter**, **The Adventures of Allegra Fullerton** is presented to the reader as a "found" manuscript. How does this notion, introduced at the outset, affect your reading of the book? Why might the author create this "frame" for the book, rather than diving directly into Allegra's story?
2. The preface refers to the narrative both as a "novel" and a "memoir." Though the overall work is clearly fiction, why might the author introduce such an ambiguity into the frame story? How does this ambiguity affect your reading of the novel?
3. The preface makes reference to "the metallic -- dare I say lifeless? -- brilliancy of so many of our own contemporary authors." What sort of argument (if any) do you think Begiebing is making about contemporary literature, not just in the preface but in the form and nature of the entire novel?
4. Allegra's own story begins, not with the start of her travels, but later, as she is held captive by Joseph Dudley. Why might the author chose to start the story at this point? What sort of shape does this device give to the overall narrative arc?
5. The novel introduces historical figures such as Richard Henry Dana, John Ruskin and, especially, Margaret Fuller as characters. How does the presence of historical figures affect your experience of the story? Does the technique contribute to the authenticity of an historical novel? What knowledge of these figures did you bring to the novel, and how did that affect your reading?
6. Although Allegra Fullerton is set in the nineteenth-century, it is, inevitably, also a contemporary novel, inasmuch as it is written by an author who lives in our time and who has been shaped by the same social dynamics. How does this tension between the contemporary and the historical inform the novel and your response to it? Why might an author choose an historical setting for a novel?
7. One of the pleasures of historical fiction is the opportunity to learn detailed information about the culture and practices of earlier eras, especially such lost traditions as itinerant portrait painting. How well does the novel succeed on this level? At the same time, contemporary readers bring some knowledge of the era and its social dynamics to such a book. How did your previous knowledge of nineteenth century New England shape your response to the book?
8. The nature and role of art is an important topic for the characters in the story, and indeed, the preface refers to the story as a kuntslerroman, or artist novel. What sort of expectations do you bring to a work of this type? In what ways does this particular novel fulfill or decline to fulfill those expectations?
9. The role of women in society is another topic of concern to many of these characters, and at the same time, it is a subject on which society's consensus has changed a great deal from the period in which the novel is set. To what extent does the novel reflect the conventions of its time period, and to what extent does it reflect contemporary concerns and opinions?
10. A minor character in the novel remarks, "Life passes us by, you know, if we do not seize upon it and live honestly with those whom we love." In what ways are Allegra Fullerton's efforts to live honestly complicated by her ambitions as

an artist and her status as a woman?

## Author Bio

Robert J. Begiebing, Professor of English at Southern New Hampshire University and member of the Authors Guild, has published four previous books, most recently **The Strange Death of Mistress Coffin** (1991), a novel chosen by the Literary Guild and the Mystery Guild as main selections.

## Critical Praise

"Begiebing weaves research and plot in the style of 19th century prose, with long, lyrical sentences and thoughtful descriptions . . . The result is a captivating tale that rings historically true, and one that will particularly appeal to those who love art and history."

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