

*The Jane Austen Book Club* by Karen Jay Fowler (Penguin Viking)

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Henry James, in one of his sterner moments, referred to the “cult of Janeites” with “their ‘dear’, our dear, everybody’s dear Jane” as “a beguiled infatuation.” Almost exactly a hundred years after The Master wrote those words, the Janeites are still at it, more beguiled and infatuated than ever, and now encouraged and inspired by an apparently endless stream of film adaptations, “sequels” to the novels, and novels about the novels. Emma Woodhouse has been embodied by Gwyneth Paltrow and then modernised as the airhead in *Clueless*; Elizabeth Bennet has been dressed to the teeth in period costume and set a-twittering in the BBC’s vastly popular *Pride and Prejudice*, in which we get to see Colin Firth in a wet shirt; Firth himself has been recycled as Mr Darcy in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, which we now seem fated to have with us on an annual basis.

*The Jane Austen Book Club* is, of course, part of this plethora, and as such not wildly original. But what Karen Joy Fowler makes of the Austen novels is entirely new and refreshing. Whereas she certainly relies heavily on the Jane Austen connection, her own story is quite strong enough and her characters interesting enough to sustain the novel. There are, famously, only six Jane Austen novels, and Fowler adapts her cast to this circumstance: her Book Club consists of six members (of whom one, presumably, is the first-person narrator, though, oddly, we never find out which one). Thus, as in most critical books on Austen, we have an introduction and conclusion with six chapters, each devoted to one of the novels – in this instance, to the circumstances surrounding the monthly discussion of the novel in question.

It would have been all too easy and too predictable to have had in each chapter a modern version of the Austen novel. Fowler is subtler than that: she allows the novel of the month to colour the chapter almost imperceptibly, in that the characters, quite naturally thinking about the novel due for discussion, tend to relate their own circumstances to those of the Austen characters in question. She does, though, drop allusions to the Austen novel, teasing her readers, sometimes playing up to their expectations, sometimes disappointing them.

Thus, in *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen embodies the thematic contrast between restraint and excess in two sisters; in the Book Club, the same contrast is situated in a mother and daughter – the mother, Sylvia, stoically enduring the desertion of her husband of more than thirty years, the daughter, Allegra, indulging her own woe over the break-up with her girl friend because the latter, a writer, stole incidents from Allegra’s life for her stories.

In another chapter, the somewhat bossy organiser of the Club, Jocelyn, is humorously linked to Austen’s meddlesome heroine Emma Woodhouse: not only does she, like Emma, have a tendency to matchmake, she is also, very much unlike Emma, a breeder of Rhodesian Ridgebacks – which is of course just another, more lucrative, kind of matchmaking. Incidentally, where Fowler’s characters deviate sharply from their Austen prototypes is in their affection for dogs – Jane Austen allowed only her silliest characters to dote on children and dogs.

In the chapter devoted to *Pride and Prejudice* (of which the original title was *First Impressions*), the phrase “first impressions” occurs six times on the first page, and the

central incident in the chapter does involve the inauspicious start to a relationship that we suspect, if we have read Austen, will probably flower into a romance – but of course we can't be sure if Fowler is setting us up only to disappoint us. .

The only masculine member of the book club, Grigg, elects as his novel *Northanger Abbey* – because, he says “I just love how it's all about reading novels. There's something very pomo going on there.” The narrator comments dryly that “The rest of us weren't intimate enough with postmodernism to give it a nickname” but of course Fowler is being even more pomo than Austen here, in having her characters reading novels that are all about reading novels. There is another humorous if tenuous link with *Northanger Abbey*, in that the chapter ends on the somewhat odd statement that “no one who'd known Grigg since infancy could have doubted he was born to be a heroine” – which Janeites will recognise as an adaptation of the first sentence of *Northanger Abbey*: “No-one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine.”

At one point Jocelyn shuts up a woman who is gossiping away during a showing of the film of *Mansfield Park*. The woman snaps back “Like your movie is so much more important than my real life.” But to these characters, there is no such clear division between fiction and “real life”: the fiction is part of their lives, and feeds into their lives, as their lives inform their reading of the novels. Allegra's girl-friend's crime, plundering Allegra's “real life” for her stories, is only a particularly flagrant form of the parasitism practised by all writers.

Fowler, of course, parasites both life and Austen's fiction. Readers who know their Jane Austen are going to get more from this book than those who don't; but Fowler considerably provides an appendix in which all six novels are briskly if somewhat cursorily summarised. She also gives us an entertaining anthology of critical opinions on Jane Austen, including Mark Twain's statement that “Every time I read ‘Pride and Prejudice’ I want to dig her up and hit her over the skull with her own shin-bone”. Readers who feel like Twain are unlikely to enjoy this novel; but even people with a quite moderate tolerance for Austen should relish this witty, sharp, affectionate tribute to “everybody's dear Jane.”