Mixing I-Pods and Empire Waists

Rude Awakenings of a Jane Austen Addict

By Laurie Viera Rigler.
Dutton, 2009. 293 pages.
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Reviewed by Janine Barchas.

The vast majority of modern Austen-inspired stories cater to our curiosity about Regency culture and the desire to witness it, as it were, first-hand. Recently, the refreshingly self-conscious television series *Lost in Austen,* for example, simultaneously mocked and indulged this Janeite longing for time travel by allowing its heroine to step through a wee door in the bathroom of her modern London flat and straight into the pages of *Pride and Prejudice*. The absurdity of finding a portal to Longbourn in the loo was simply part of that production's fun. Such a miraculous and physics-defying transfer of time and space is, after all, a metaphor for the act of reading itself: we do indeed enter Austen's world through her novels. The implied metaphor of books as doors into distant worlds even has its own established literary history. (Think *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* or *Alice in Wonderland*.)

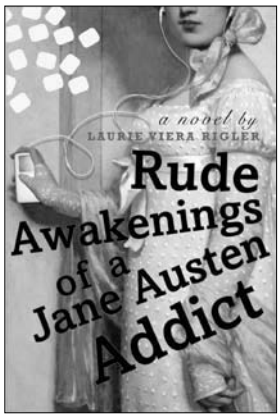
It is within this laudable and lively fantasy tradition that Laurie Viera Rigler's first novel, *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict,* stepped across the threshold of Austen's Regency world. In *Confessions,* Rigler unceremoniously plunked Courtney Stone, a stout modern singleton from Los Angeles, into the tall body of a young woman living in England in 1813. The only thing that Courtney initially has in common with her Regency doppelganger is a shared fondness for the first two novels of Jane Austen. In her unpretentious new sequel, *Rude Awakenings of a Jane Austen Addict,* Rigler provides the anticipated twist: she brings Jane Mansfield, the person with whom her first heroine swapped identities, back to present-day Los Angeles. The narrator of *Rude Awakenings* reacts with horror to the news of her sudden relocation: "What? Has my mother had me drugged and transported to the Americas?" When she is urged to hurry, or risk being late for an appointment, Jane retorts: "Late? As in later than 2009? How much later can one possibly be?" This witty sequel no longer asks what we would think of Jane's world, by now a well-worn theme, but where she might find humor in ours.

While domestic routines in 1813 were duly researched for *Confessions,* familiarity complicates Rigler's task in *Rude Awakenings.* The sequel shows our present through the eyes of a Regency narrator. Surely it is more difficult to surprise a modern reader with an entertaining description of a clock radio, a freeway, or a cappuccino (and it would be spoiling the fun to reveal her narrative descriptions of ordinary occurrences), than it is to reward our curiosity about Regency life. Humor is, of course, one of the immediate rewards for viewing the familiar with alienation. In addition to being funny, however, the historical detachment of *Rude Awakenings,* although it is set in modern LA, may make it more Austen-like than its predecessor.

For it is Jane Austen, after all, whom we celebrate for observing her own world—its people, habits, and cultural prejudices—with comic detachment. In the fun-house mirror of Austen's wit, Regency life finds itself simultaneously reflected and remade. Take, for example, the well-known letter in which Austen relates to Cassandra the current fashion for fruity hats:

> *Flowers are very much worn, & Fruit is still more the thing.—Eliz: has a bunch of Strawberries, & I have seen Grapes, Cherries, Plumbs & Apricots—There are likewise Almonds & raisins, french plumbs & Tamarinds at the Grocers, but I have never seen any of them in hats.—*

She promises Cassandra to "go in quest of something" to update her hat back home. In spite of having been given "unlimited powers concerning Your Sprig," a week later she remains undecided whether to buy Cassandra "4 or 5 very pretty sprigs" of flowers "for the same money which would procure only one Orleans plumb." Momentarily breaking her po-faced considerations about choices and costs, Austen determines in favor of flowers, quipping, "I cannot help thinking that it is more natural to have flowers grow out of the head than fruit." The tone is a delicious mixture of consumer desire and satirical detachment, topped with a dollop of self-mockery.



Although the ubiquitous tends, like all things considered typical for a time, towards the invisible, Austen noticed and recorded the mundane. She found humor and significance in daily objects and routines. As a result, there is an affinity between the eagle-eyed details of domestic life in Austen's letters and the wry descriptions of, say, family dynamics in the novels. So too, Rigler's comic accounts of all-too-familiar objects and habits in our modern lives, when related through the language of her nineteenth-century narrator, lead naturally—if elliptically—to social satire.

Rigler awakens us, however rudely, to the need to gaze upon our present reality as enthusiastically and thoroughly as we do Austen's world. So, at the next AGM, don't feel guilty about putting that modern cell phone and plastic hotel key in your Regency-style reticule. Mix it up!

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