

Modernizing Elinor and Marianne

Sense and Sensibility

By Joanna Trollope.

HarperCollins 2013. 362 pages.

Paperback USA. \$15.99.

Review by Nora Foster Stovel

Any admirer of Jane Austen's and/or Joanna Trollope's fiction is bound to enjoy the latter's take on the former's first published novel. As her title indicates, Trollope is faithful to Austen's characters and plot structure, a feature that will endear her to Janeites, but she has fun updating the action to a contemporary setting that will also appeal to Austen novices. Imagine Austen with Smart Phones, Facebook, and YouTube.

Trollope excels at portraying character and relationships: she renders the sisters, Elinor and Marianne, known as "Ellie" and "M," sympathetically but delineates their differences distinctly: Ellie, M tells her mother, Belle, "thinks before she feels," whereas M wants "to be overwhelmed." And overwhelmed she is. M suffers from asthma, which renders her health delicate and her family and friends solicitous. Asthma, rather than a sprained ankle, weakens her, requiring the support of Willoughby.

Willoughby, known as "Wills," a moniker that reflects the nickname of Prince William of Windsor, is referred to, appropriately, as a "scumbag" and "shag bandit." Ever flashy, he drives an Aston Martin, in which Margaret, known as "Mags," longs to ride. Wills, a real estate broker, has just brokered a London flat to a Greek shipping magnate, whose daughter, Aggy Cally, he is dating.

When Belle opines that Wills has decamped because his potential patroness, Jane Smith of Allenham, disapproves of a match with Marianne as a result of her family's impecuniousness, Ellie responds with the ironic statement, "this isn't 1810, for God's sake. Money doesn't dictate relationships." Financial considerations do rule relationships

for Willoughby, however, who, with his "champagne tastes," has "followed the money." Ellie wonders how she can break the news to her sister: "You couldn't make it up. Not in this day and age," she reflects metafictionally.

Trollope's most amusing modernization of Austen's plot occurs when Willoughby's cruel rejection of Marianne is caught on someone's smart phone video camera and publicized on YouTube, where the Ferrars family witnesses it, thanks to the thoughtful friends who share the link with all and sundry.

Despite this amusing modernization of Austen's novel, Trollope's novel demonstrates that perhaps women haven't come such a long way since the Regency after all. When Mrs. Jennings asks whether fourteen-year-old Margaret has a boyfriend yet, Belle comments, "You're like those nineteenth-century novels where marriage is the only career option for a middle-class girl," and Mrs. Jennings responds: "People pretend things have changed, but have they, really?" For example, Ellie still has to wait patiently for Ed to come to his senses. In fact, the one place where Trollope's contemporization of Austen breaks down is in Edward's fidelity to Lucy. Elinor defends him to "Bill" Brandon, explaining, "He's defending Lucy; he's being kind of old-fashioned, and honourable." She adds, "Bill, I think he'd rather live, not particularly happily, in a way he thought was right, and not—not purely materialistically, like his family, than in a way that didn't sit well with his conscience. I know it isn't how people think now, but I think he's got to do it his way." To herself, however, she realizes that people will think, "That gormless Ferrars boy, captured by a gold-digger." Trollope employs rings as a symbol of Edward and Elinor's eventual harmony, as he wears a ring identical to the one he gave her. Eventually they plight their troth, appropriately, in Margaret's tree house, which Edward constructed for her.

Trollope excels at comic characters, and her characterization of the Steele sisters, especially their idiom, is priceless. Lucy is a reflexologist, and Nancy's lingo is bizarre: "Amazeballs" and "Totes amaze Hilar!" Charlotte is appropriately air-headed, referring to "Fabby Delaford." Robert Ferrars' idiom, with his "darling," "ducky," and "easy peasy" is equally precious. Trollope portrays Robert as flagrantly gay, making Lucy's marriage appear even more mercenary, since the pair can hardly be believed to be in love with each other.

Trollope fills in Fanny's full awfulness, climaxing in a scene where she snatches a raspberry, which Elinor has just plucked from a Norlands bush, out of her sister-in-law's fingers, and grinds it into the ground with her heel as a vivid demonstration of her sense of ownership. John warns Elinor to "put Ed right out of your mind. He is not for you, or the likes of you, most definitely. OK?" Later, Edward accuses John of being "pussey-whipped" by his wife and mother-in-law.

Trollope renders the Eliza back-story particularly well and offers the reader a satisfying scene between Edward and his mother, as well as an appealing love scene between Colonel Brandon and Marianne that climaxes with her kissing him.

There are five more Austen novels for Trollope to modernize, and we can only hope that she will take up the challenge.

Nora Foster Stovel is Professor Emerita at the University of Alberta. She has published on Jane Austen, D.H. Lawrence, Margaret Drabble, Carol Shields, and Margaret Laurence, including Divining Margaret Laurence (2008). She is currently composing Carol Shields's Vision and Voice and Women with Wings: The Romantic Ballerina and editing Margaret Laurence's Essays and The Creation of iGiselle.

