



“Little Women?”: Karen Joy Fowler’s Adventure in Austenland

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KAREN JOY FOWLER’S *Jane Austen Book Club* (2004) is in itself a match-making narrative relating to its mini-fan-club, which rotates with the seasons to reveal something about the Austen novels, but rather more about the individuals who compose this one, with six people over six months discussing six novels.¹ A succession of literary slides reveals aspects of the formation of each of the characters (the narratives which bring them to Austen’s) and the Austen they half perceive and half create, bringing them into consonance, though by no means mechanically, with each Austen text, and its respective cargo of heroes and heroines. The time is now-ish (though one intuits a longish gestation period for the novel), the setting California, the climate “Mediterranean” and so, like its mores, different from Jane Austen’s, and we contemplate narrative differences as well as effects of repetition. You see the fiction fitting Austen’s where it touches, glancing and uncertain, yet with a persistent, knowing, Janeite sort of wink (even if, just occasionally, the reader is tempted to feel that Austen is present if you find it helpful to think of her). “Each of us has a private Austen,” states the “Prologue,” and this is the theme of themes here (1). Consequently it was I think a big-ish mistake to bring in, at the conclusion, the public Austen of critical processing and pronouncements (258-79), epigraphed by that pre-eminent literary paradiddler Martin Amis, writing merrily away in *The New Yorker* about the appeal of Austen to “Marxists and semioticians” and the other wackies.

But one can't but note that the "phenomenological" Austen of the reasonably endearing characters' impressions also abides our question: for example, Prudie's conclusion about Edmund as the suitor of Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, that "an unforgiving prick is an unforgiving prick" (110), which seems to be laying at least some claim to critical authority, is countered by that novel's clear presentation of Mary's metropolitan worldly-mindedness in her incessant pursuit of "money and greatness," in Mrs. Jennings's idiom (*S&S* Ch. 37)—she would not make a good wife for a clergyman who, unlike many of his ilk, takes things ultra-seriously. Edmund, in his way, may be there to "make amends for" the Mr. Collins of her previous novel—Jane Austen, like Mary Crawford, might also have wished to have "spoken more respectfully of the cloth" after creating a "creature of clerical cut" (in T. S. Eliot's phrasing) like Collins, and the final revelation of Mary's inhumanity in wishing the dissipated elder son Tom Bertram dead in order that her putative husband Edmund, and herself, will achieve social prominence, definitely—indeed definitively—condemns her. So the fact that the Book Club characters are infatuated with Austen does not always serve to make their observations on her less fatuous, or less than fatuous. The governing idea might be that it is precisely a pre-"professionalized" approach to literature which is "capable of saving us," in the words of Matthew Arnold, but this seems to occur *per accidens* rather than by virtue, or the virtues, of the Austen books themselves. Yet, as it happens the characters are paired off by the end, with Austen as something of a catalyst at least, but rather in the mood of *As You Like It*, with a hint of Touchstone's cynicism over what, precisely, is likely to "happen next."

Middle-aged Jocelyn is in the midst of things here as founder-member, dog breeder, watcher over the fortunes of her long-term friend Sylvia, currently estranged from her husband Daniel—himself originally a boyfriend of Sylvia's. Sylvia's daughter Allegra, a high-strung lesbian, lover of thrills and spills, who leaps from airplanes (parachuted) to feel alive (and injures herself), is herself estranged from her girlfriend Corinne, who attempted to sell the secret experiences vouchsafed by Allegra to her lover as short stories to magazines, without success—with the failure rankling at least as much as the betrayal. Austen's own early publishing debacles with the cavalier and dismissive firms Cadell and Crosby (the work which became *Northanger Abbey* was "declined by return of post") are cited by way of ironic consolation (77). In general the tone here is droll and dry, with a slightly malicious empathy; and occasional recourses to whimsy also decorate or disfigure according to taste.

In March the group meets at Jocelyn's and reads *Emma*, and Jocelyn has transparent analogies with the celebrated matchmaker (or mis-matcher) of the novel. Her Frank Churchill and her Mr. Elton in one is one Tony, originally Sylvia's suitor, a man of ploys who conspires to kiss her against her will and sends a secret puppy (what Frank himself was ironically hinted at as being), by analogy with Churchill's infatuated gift of the piano to long-suffering but strong-minded Jane Fairfax in *Emma* (Ch. 26). This leads, ironically, to the lifelong canine obsession, and Jocelyn and the only man of the group, the punitively-named Grigg, will unite under the aegis of this hobby (dogs, as it happens, were forbidden in Grigg's girl-dominated home as his weak and silly father all-too-understandably declined to countenance them as a result of their unwelcome attentions to him as a meter-reader). Jocelyn and Grigg originally met in a hotel currently cross-hatching science fiction buffs and dog handlers, in a lift rather overcrowded with some singularly impolite vampires (128). Herself capable of some forms of vamping, Jocelyn, her name and nature suggesting, perhaps, a hint of masculinity, will rope in the hapless, faintly "girlie-fied" Grigg for the discussions, to the accompaniment of a few murmurs from the previously all-feminine group.

In April it meets to read *Sense and Sensibility* with the volatile Allegra. Like the noble Elinor in that novel, her considerate mother Sylvia will have to console her even in (and for) her own distresses, as Daniel embarks on an affair with lawyer Pam and the marriage looks to be over. (Allegra also seems to resume romantic Marianne as a focus for discussion of the putatively "queer" Jane Austen, one which, most will now agree, produced a good deal more heat than light, though it has of course its "moment.")

In May we read *Mansfield Park* with a Prudie-as-Fanny perhaps, reared as she is on fantasies of plenitude and elegance by her deeply inadequate, slut-tish, and neglectful mother, a suggestive portrait for students of Austen's Portsmouth and its Mansfield antithesis. Prudie should, one feels, be rather more disturbed as a result—just as, antithetically, Allegra's neurasthenics seem excessive in the light of her gentle bourgeois upbringing. Prudie, matured, is still drawn to fantasy-worlds, to a France-as-imagined which she loves too much ever to have visited by way of reality-check, for instance (102). This causes her to burst fairly consistently into gnomish Gallicisms which strain the politeness as well as the construing powers of the assembled Janeites, though in a larger sense they constantly misconstrue each other in any case. Ongoing at Prudie's school is an allotrope of this other world, cool and remote as seen from Californian heat, a production of "Brigadoon," the

primary-color musical with its time-warped Scottish village and its dream of passion for which Prudie's school incessantly rehearses (103-09), with a libidinal emphasis which, in a sophisticated way, Austen's fiction replicates or is analogous to. Art, in dramatising desires, also foments them.

In June we read *Northanger Abbey* at Grigg's. Grigg does seem to be a version of the ingenuous heroine of the novel, and his sci-fi obsessions mirror Catherine's likeable callowness as she wanders in what Keats would have called the "chambers of maiden thought" (in 1818—the year of the Austen novel's publication) (Keats 90). Indeed Grigg astounds his auditors as a connoisseur of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), a sort of sci-fi prototype of other worlds than Catherine's complacent mentor Henry Tilney's version of a much-too-reassuring England. But Grigg, horrifyingly to the others, has not yet tangled with *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel whose tensions may announce the distance and distaste between himself and Jocelyn here even as they become emotionally "involved." Grigg in this way is also the hesitating naïf who will finally challenge his (female version of) know-all Henry Tilney, though his muttering self-effacement still leaves the declaration of his love for Jocelyn to his concerned sister Cat ("God knows it can't be left up to him. He'll never make a move" [230]). Only his incivility, itself an Austen theme in relation to love, marked by his mastery of the Darcy idiom "every savage can dance," as he flounces onto the floor at the "annual fund-raiser for the Sacramento public library" (158) with the woman he loves, betrays the depth of his feeling as Jocelyn suffers his apparently inexplicable rudeness and revolt.

In July we read *Pride and Prejudice*, and with "First Impressions" as Austen's first impression of a title which would become the properly proud *Pride and Prejudice*, we get each character's first impression of another. Here we are with Bernadette, who, at sixty-seven, the "Epilogue" assures us, will marry her sixth husband, environmentally ambitious Senor Obando of Puerto Rica, in a kind of parody of Austen's repeated, yet differenced, marriage-plot outcomes in her six completed novels: as Bernadette explained, none of her marriages fulfilled her, failed or staled through mundane repetition and partial fulfilments. As it is, Bernadette and Senor Obando's shared repertoire of show-stoppers from musicals includes a version of what one fears may be the specially relevant "A Cockeyed Optimist" (248), a sort of demotic version of Dr. Johnson's celebrated quip or topos about attempted repetitions of marriage entailing a "triumph of hope over experience." In Sylvia's house again in August, the group will read *Persuasion*, cuing memories of librarian Sylvia's genealogical researches in the California History Room analogous with Sir

Walter Elliot's peerage preoccupations in the Austen text. Here, too, Sylvia and Daniel are appositely reunited as a result of sitting by accident-prone Allegra's bedside, brought together by nursing like the protagonists of *Persuasion* itself, as Daniel, ditched by his lawyer, murmurs hero Frederick Wentworth's celebrated mantra of having been unjust, weak, and resentful, apparently always-already "subjected" by an underlying constancy no one had previously noticed (232). Meanwhile, lesbian lovers Corinne and Allegra will shakily reunite, although the celebrated Austen maxim (from *Emma*) to the effect that "seldom does complete truth belong to any human disclosure" (431), cited as epigraph to the whole here, will apply (Allegra had a brief crush on, perhaps affair with, her hospital doctor, Dr. Yep [the name perhaps a "street-cred-ish" version of the Joycean-feminine "yes I will yes" at the end of Molly Bloom's soliloquy in *Ulysses* (1922)], and has surely earned her right to withhold forever the missing portion of narrative from a Corinne obsessed with "making it" as a creative writer). So Jane Austen, once more present and correct as textual matchmaker, appears herself to have "succeeded" in dissolving the round table of "Janeites" she inspired. As Marilyn Butler has recently reminded us, the term was coined by George Saintsbury in his 1894 edition of *Pride and Prejudice* (976), but for us immediately evokes Rudyard Kipling's odd, and (at least in Claudia Johnson's account), decidedly "queer" story in *Debits and Credits* (1924) (Johnson 143-63). Fortunately for Karen Joy Fowler, these earlier incarnations of Jane-intoxicated "men" ("men" it certainly was on *that* occasion) were, though in their way admirably besotted, also not necessarily distinguished by their perspicacity about their matchless heroine. The tradition lives on.

Sly, dry, and droll, this new Austen theme park will indeed delight the Janeite tendency, although one might warn of a slight, brown-edging tackiness to some episodes which might just slightly scandalise more than the prissy. It also disguises by advertising its Austen genealogy, its truer affinities perhaps with other American writers—some I could name, like John Barth and John Cheever, Raymond Carver and Margaret Atwood, with *bien d'autres encore*, as Prudie would no doubt put it. This novel "appreciates" the Austen style after its fashion, but reads as if it, or "the group," needs Austen mostly as a kind of comforter, a marker of ethical centrality and reassurance in a world without much in the way of moral piloting or "emotional intelligence." Austen famously desiderated "three or four families in a country village" as good "casting ground" for a novelist, and here, in a slightly different register, is a version of that modest scale and sense of "*les petits gens de l'hi-*

stoire" (blame Prudie again, if you will, in the guise of Laforgue, not Baude-
laire, this time). In his *Guardian* review, John Mullan has some acutely angled
complaints about the work, but one of them, that "Fowler does not contrive
any pleasing symmetries between her stories and Austen's" (27), might itself
be a source of pleasure for a reader who wishes to be "teased out of thought,"
as Keats might put it.

NOTE

1. According to Paula Marantz Cohen, herself something of an "Austen club" novelist, the novel offers "Jane Austen's social microcosm reduced to an even smaller microcosm" in a short review ("courtship Plots"), in the *TLS*, October 29, 2004, 22.

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