

AUSTEN GETS THE YA TREATMENT

Reviews by Emma Kantor

Last year, no fewer than three contemporary young adult authors delivered homages to *Pride and Prejudice*, giving the 19th century comedy of manners a 21st century makeover. Austen's sparkling critique of class condescension, superficial judgments, and restrictive gender roles provides the foundation, while discussions of race, privilege, and sexual harassment endow these narratives with a modern silhouette. In true Austenian fashion, rapid-fire repartee is central to each of the reimaginings.

Accomplished: A Georgie Darcy Novel

By Amanda Quain

Wednesday Books (2022), 320 pages

Hardcover, \$18.99/ebook, \$10.99

Accomplished takes its epigraph from a *Pride and Prejudice* quotation spoken by George Wickham.

"What sort of a girl is Miss Darcy? ... I wish I could call her amiable. It gives me pain to speak ill of a Darcy. But she is too much like her brother—very, very proud. She is a handsome girl, about fifteen or sixteen, and I understand, highly accomplished." Wickham, of course, is exposed as a rake and a liar who preys on vulnerable young women, including Miss Darcy. In Quain's Gen Z takeoff, Georgiana, affectionately known as "Georgie," gets to tell her own story.

In candid first-person, Georgie recounts the events leading up to her disgrace and near expulsion from prestigious East Coast boarding school Pemberley Academy. Georgie was inseparable from her older brother, Fitz, until his friend Wickham Foster swooped in and charmed her, all while secretly using her to sell Adderall out of her dorm room. Now in her junior year, Georgie is determined to earn back Fitz's trust and prove she's an "accomplished" student, worthy of the Darcy name. But will her plans be foiled when Wickham returns to campus?

Quain excels at portraying the frictions within sibling relationships, as Fitz takes on a paternal and overprotective role following the death of their father. It's also a pleasure to see the slow-burn romance heat up between Georgie and loyal friend-turned-crush Avery against the backdrop of their marching-band rehearsals. (Whereas Austen's Georgiana plays the ladylike pianoforte, Georgie's instrument of choice is the brassy trombone.) Avery, who works a campus job and is earning a college scholarship, rightfully calls Georgie out on her unchecked privilege.

A side plot involving Georgie's matchmaking schemes for Fitz and his alluring rival—you guessed it—Lizzie Bennet, and a cameo by affable frat boy Charles Bingley provide amusing nods to the source text (not to mention *Emma*). Like Georgie, who writes fanfic inspired by her favorite costume drama and owns a Camp Sanditon T-shirt, Quain wears her fandom on her sleeve.



Being Mary Bennet

By J. C. Peterson

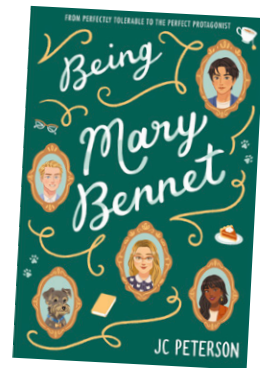
HarperTeen (2022),

384 pages

Hardcover, \$17.99/

ebook, \$1.99

Janice Hadlow took on sister Mary in *The Other Bennet Sister* (reviewed in summer 2021), but this YA version



by J. C. Peterson, *Being Mary*

Bennet, unfolds at an elite boarding school. The premise is risky: taking an often unlikable secondary character and thrusting her into the spotlight. Readers may be turned off by "academic extraordinaire and solitude expert" (1) Marnie Barnes' pedantic and antisocial demeanor, but those who stick around long enough will be rewarded with an uplifting story of sisterhood, female friendship, and genuine growth.

The plot kicks off when Marnie's roommate, Adhira Fitz, compares Marnie to Mary Bennet, "the dowdy, lecture-prone sister from *Pride and Prejudice* no one likes" (27). Marnie internalizes the comment so intensely that she designs a multipronged plan to rid herself of any Mary-like qualities and resolves to be more like her oldest sister, a successful documentary filmmaker and modern analogue for Elizabeth Bennet. At the heart of Marnie's mission is a school-wide competition for the best community service project, which her sister won when she was a senior. Marnie launches a partnership between a local bookmobile and animal shelter that gives kids the opportunity to read aloud to rescue animals. Although she's reluctant to ask them for help, Marnie's dad and older sister prove to be supportive mentors.

Throughout the project, Marnie learns to see her family not as impossible ideals to measure up against but as individuals with their own flaws and insecurities. She also finds that hard work, collaboration, and giving back are their own rewards, more valuable than any prize.

A sweet romance with Whit, the volunteer coordinator from the animal shelter, provides further impetus for Marnie to step outside her comfort zone, culminating in a sumptuous Regency-themed ball. But Marnie's longtime crush on an older family friend, Hayworth, casts a shadow over her budding relationship with Whit. It also exposes the toxic masculinity

of Silicon Valley—an aspect that feels somewhat shoehorned into the plot. Ultimately, in spite of Marnie’s abrasive manner and social missteps, it’s hard not to root for a booklover and sensitive soul striving to be the main character in her own life.

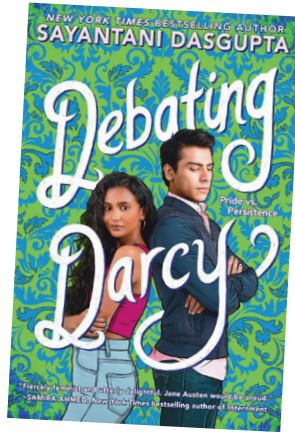
Debating Darcy

By Sayantani DasGupta

Scholastic (2022), 320 pages

Hardcover, \$18.99/ebook, \$11.99

An almost scene-for-scene retelling of *Pride and Prejudice* transported to the world of high school forensics, *Debating Darcy* is perhaps the meatiest of these three homages, bringing into focus systemic elitism, sexism, and colorism without skimping on the comedy.



Austen may well have invented what are now hallmarks of contemporary YA romance—the enemies-to-lovers dynamic and the love triangle—and DasGupta’s leads slot easily into the familiar story structure. There’s the headstrong and quick-witted Leela Bose, who is Bengali American; the handsome but austere Firoze Darcy, who is Pakistani American; and the superficial charmer Jishnu Waddedar, also of Bengali descent. The Bennet family is mapped onto the fellow members of Leela’s ragtag public school debate team, chaperoned by the neurotic Mrs. Bennet and her husband, oblivious patriarch Mr. Bennet. Leela comes to imagine debate as a form of dance, pivotal in her competitive courtship with Firoze. “Our arguments twirled like turns around a ballroom; our points and counterpoints dipped and flowed, rising and falling on the music of our voices” (242). As much as Leela loves 18th

and 19th century British literature, she recognizes that “if I really was ever transported back into the time of any of these novels, I would be a scullery maid, not a heroine dancing at a ball. Those times and those stories weren’t made for brown girls like me” (33).

Bringing to life an intersectionally diverse cast, including several teens of color from immigrant families and LGBTQ characters, DasGupta reclaims this beloved classic for anyone who has been overlooked by the Western canon. The book is replete with Easter eggs for Austen devotees in the form of direct quotations and character names and locations.

While some of the antiquated banter feels forced coming from the mouths of present-day teens, the book smartly updates the circumstances surrounding Lydia’s “disgrace” for the #MeToo era, revealing a through line between the whisper networks of yore and today’s social media takedowns of dangerous men. Liberated from the restrictions of the conventional marriage plot, the characters in *Debating Darcy* still confront sexist double standards and harassment in the male-dominated debate arena. By reformatting Lydia as a feminist figure, DasGupta explores the urgent value of finding one’s voice in concert with other women and expands on Austen’s concept of sisterhood.

Emma Kantor is a Brooklyn-based writer, comedian, and deputy children’s book editor at Publishers Weekly.

Summer Reading Issue Preview

Our annual Summer Reading Issue, out in mid-June, will include reviews of the following (and more!):

- *The Jane Austen Remedy: It Is a Truth Universally Acknowledged That a Book Can Change a Life*, a memoir by Ruth Wilson (reviewed by Maura Henry)
- *An A-Z of Jane Austen* by Michael Greaney (reviewed by Ruth Perry)
- *Jane Austen, Sex, and Romance: Engaging with Desire in the Novels and Beyond*, an anthology edited by Nora Nachumi and Stephanie Oppenheim (reviewed by Jason Solinger)
- *Fashionable Goodness: Christianity in Jane Austen’s England* by Brenda S. Cox (reviewed by Roger Moore)
- *Jane Austen: A Companion* by Laura Dabundo (reviewed by Elsa Solender)
- *Mrs. Darcy’s Dilemma* by Diana Birchall (reviewed by Elizabeth Viesz)
- *A Life of Her Own: The Story of Margaret Dashwood* by Wendy Zomparelli (reviewed by Diana Roome)

