

courtship plot far better than her heteronormative courtship with Augusta's milquetoast heir.

Engagingly written and narratively taut, *Families of the Heart* is well worth reading for scholars of the novel, and is poised to launch any number of exciting further conversations.

Manushag N. Powell is professor of English at Purdue University and director of the Defoe Society.

PLAYING WITH MATCHES

Emma of 83rd Street

By Audrey Bellezza and Emily Harding
Gallery Books (2023), 384 pages
Paperback, \$17.99/ebook, \$11.99

Review by Emma Kantor

"I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like," Jane Austen allegedly said of her fictional creation Emma Woodhouse. In Audrey Bellezza and Emily Harding's contemporary reimagining, Austen's least likable (or is it most unlikable?) protagonist is a 23-year-old grad student with a focus on art history—and matchmaking. Whereas *Clueless* brought the queen bee of Highbury to high school, *Emma of 83rd Street* transplants the meddling but well-intentioned socialite to Manhattan's Upper East Side. The result is a frothy friends-to-lovers rom-com that channels the comedic spirit of the original novel while still delivering a few surprises.

Making their literary debut, Bellezza and Harding are TV writers and producers, experience that shines through in the novel's snappy dialogue and brisk pacing. When it comes to the central couple, they wisely reduce the age gap between Emma and Knightley for modern tastes, although today's readers will be less forgiving of Knightley's frequent mansplaining. The authors sustain a steady will-they-or-won't-they tension between the duo, again seeming to draw on their roots in television.

The main deviation from Austen's courtship plot lies in the centering of female desire. In the here and now, sex outside of marriage or commitment is socially acceptable for women. Emma enjoys her share of flirtations with hipster baristas and handsome venture capitalists although she has a more traditional endgame in mind: "a forever relationship" (63). And, as she later tells Knightley in an intimate moment, "I also want your hands and your mouth and orgasms and just ... everything" (353).

There's pleasure, too, in the blunders and missteps along the path to the couple's union. *Emma of 83rd Street* celebrates these youthful



mistakes, blossoming into a thoughtful, meta-fictional meditation on what makes art—and fiction—so appealing to the human heart and mind. "They're not perfect, are they?" Emma asks an administrator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art about the paintings on view. "And that's kind of the point. Even the masterpieces have flaws. Mistakes the artist tried to fix or hide. ... Those flaws don't detract from art's value. If anything, they add to it. They make it more real. More human" (294).

If Emma, with all of her character defects, is unlikable, she is also lifelike.

Appropriately, Emma's late-breaking epiphany about her love for Knightley strikes while she's revisiting a familiar painting in the Met's collection: Klimt's *Mäda Primavesi*. She recalls his earlier comment comparing her to the portrait's young subject and sees the artwork, and herself, anew. "Eyes wide, Emma gazed up at the painting like she was seeing it for the first time. The imperfect strokes that form her proud expression, her confident stance. Klimt's painting hadn't changed, but Emma's view was different now. So wild and new and terrifying." All at once it hits her: "Knightley saw her imperfections, he watched her make mistakes, but he also knew it was what made her who she was. She wasn't perfect. And despite how he tried, Knightley wasn't either" (298–299). They are, in fact, a perfectly imperfect match.

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

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