

Elizabeth Bennet's role, infomercial actor Eden Blake. Eden lacks confidence, but not talent. When she steps in for the lead, who has abruptly quit the show, her nerves get the better of her ... but not for long.

In this version, unlike other *Pride and Prejudice* homages, the Darcy character is not merely misunderstood at the beginning. He is, bluntly put, a jerk, played by Brennon Thorne, an accomplished Broadway actor. Slightly inebriated at their first meeting, he questions Eden's training and professionalism. This misstep affects their relationship's trajectory. Of course it does. This is, after all, a meta version of *Pride and Prejudice*. Brennon's career has been his sole focus to date; now it's time to focus on his humanity.

For her part, Eden makes mistakes, is inconsistent in her performances, and feels her lack of formal training. In the course of the novel, she learns to trust herself, take advice, and open up to new opportunities.

The misunderstanding via Wickham, the letter, the visit to Pemberley (in this case the Upper East Side), Liz/Eden's realization, the coming together, the wedding at the end. These narrative beats are part of what make the story, and readers will enjoy how they are handled here.

For theater fans, the insight into a show on tour rings true enough to be enjoyed. The "stage kiss" is a choreographed moment in the show that gets disrupted by the evolution of Brennon and Eden as people and as a couple. Some stage managers may break into hives during the book's kiss machinations, but the premise of two actors becoming lovers while playing lovers is fun, and fun is important to this novel.

The growth and development of the two leads, in addition to lots of romance and sex, help the reader want to turn the pages. The story reimagines rather than reinvents *Pride and Prejudice*, keeping it an entertaining read.

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GENDER-BENDING AUSTEN

Reviews by Emma Kantor

A trio of young adult novels reimagines Austen with gender-swapped and LGBTQ casts, expanding her heteronormative marriage plots beyond the binary. Family, friendship, and romance take center stage as contemporary authors spotlight a diverse spectrum of teen relationships and identities.

Ghosted: A Northanger Abbey Novel

By Amanda Quain

Wednesday Books (2023); 384 pages; hardcover, \$20

The author of *Accomplished: A Georgie Darcy Novel* is back with a new Austen retelling, this time delivering a gender-reversed *Northanger Abbey* with considerably more ghost hunting than husband hunting. Here, the titular abbey is "America's most notoriously haunted high school" (8), presided over by heroine Henrietta "Hattie"

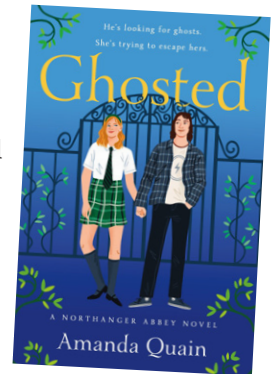
Tilney's austere mother, who serves as headmistress. Quain fits the elite East Coast academy with the architectural trappings of gothic horror, from ghoulish gargoyles to secret passages and crypts: "Northanger Abbey was, objectively, an extremely intimidating-looking place, even if you didn't think it was haunted" (21).

After all, what's more terrifying than high school?

Hattie believed in an afterlife until her paranormal-obsessed father died, leaving her to confront the cold facts of mortality. She abandons their pastime of researching hauntings, telling herself, "Ghost stories were for children and people who didn't know how to face real life" (31). Hattie devotes her energy to her studies, determined to meet her mom's exacting standards by "living a normal life ... hiding away the parts of me that were strange and broken and unusual" (35-36). Her end goal is acceptance at the prestigious Udolpho College—another nod to the gothic novels parodied by Austen.

But when handsome and affable transfer student Kit Morland arrives on a scholarship from the National Paranormal Society of Investigators, Hattie's "normal life" is subsumed by the paranormal. The two pair up on a class project, with Kit arguing that ghosts exist on campus and Hattie taking the opposing stance. Their Mulder/Scully-esque rapport of believer and nonbeliever is a delight, as is their slow-burn romance.

Like Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*, Kit is openhearted and credulous. "And what's wrong with seeing mystery everywhere?" he asks the skeptical Hattie (98). Their debates bring to mind the lively discussions between Austen's Catherine and Henry about fiction—and women who read novels. But in this instance, it's the man who defends the value of looking beyond the veil of reality. Kit stands for imagination and possibility, while Hattie clings to reason and science. "I think belief—the sort you can live with, the sort you have to reckon with—isn't binary," Kit suggests. "Belief leaves room for nuance" (306). His rejection of the standard narrative of life versus death becomes a binary-busting social rebellion.



As the couple grows closer, Kit shows Hattie “it’s okay to believe” (98)—in ghosts, in love, and in her own potential. She revives the part of herself that appreciates ghost stories as historical artifacts as well as a means of keeping her father’s memory alive. In doing so, she also gains a more nuanced understanding of her relationship with her mother and of their shared prison of grief. She comes to see her mother not as a gothic tyrant—“Dr. Tilney, Headmistress, destroyer of worlds ... a cartoon villain”—but as a human being (333).

Emmett

By L. C. Rosen
Little, Brown Books for Young Readers (2023)
272 pages; hardcover, \$18.99



As in *Ghosted*, the main character in *Emmett* is grieving a beloved parent. An acute sense of loss informs Emmett’s aversion to romance. “I don’t do relationships,” (2) he declares at the story’s start with all the confidence of Austen’s marriage-resistant Emma. He clings to the scientific fact he learned from his late mother, a doctor: “The prefrontal cortex doesn’t mature until you’re twenty-five” and, according to Emmett, “a relationship before your brain is developed is silly. Why get involved with something that’s just going to end? Relationships are painful. Spare yourself” (3). That doesn’t preclude him from having plenty of no-strings-attached fun in the meantime. “The hormonal teenage body has needs”—and his friend with benefits, Harrison, “is good at fulfilling them” (7).

Queering the patron/protegee dynamic from *Emma*, Rosen shows how lust and love can be separated without judgment in modern society. As Emmett tells his friend Miles, a modern Knightley, “I’m queer. My closest friends, the people who really get me, they’re also going to be the people I sleep with, and when I’m ready for it, my dating pool. Sex, friendship, romance, all in one spot. ... That’s fine. What’s important is keeping everything neat. ... Nothing messy” (27–28). Still, things get messy when Harrison catches feelings and Emmett attempts to deflect them by finding a suitable replacement from among their peers at Highbury Academy. Of course, he’s as hapless a matchmaker as Miss Woodhouse before him. Life without labels is liberating; it’s also a source of potential confusion and misunderstanding.

Most poignant is the portrayal of Emmett’s father, the bereft widower. Rather than being played for comic relief, his hypochondria is shown as a symptom of loss. It even borders on abuse when he fixates on his son’s health, frequently testing Emmett’s blood for possible infections. Emmett’s fear of heartbreak is all the more believable. “I never want to be like this,” he says of his dad (101). But the father’s and son’s anxieties are mirrored. After realizing that his attempts at setting up Harrison have backfired, Emmett is consumed with guilt, thinking in terms of

pathogens: “this terrible misunderstanding I’ve created, it’s like a disease, and if it’s hurting me this badly, it will kill him” (148).

Emmett shines in its portrayal of an otherwise “blessed” (1) and privileged young man navigating difficult relationships. Above all, though, Rosen offers a joyful and celebratory portrait of the myriad forms that friendship, romantic love, and sexual exploration can take—with interfaith and interracial couples, as well as lesbian, gay, trans, nonbinary, and demisexual representation. “It’s going to be messy. And messy can hurt, but sometimes it’s great, too,” Emmett’s best friend affirms (155). There’s freedom in nonconformity. “You know, I like the mess,” says another friend. “We get to make these relationships up. We’re queer” (210).

Pride and Prejudice and Pittsburgh

By Rachael Lippincott
Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers (2023);
336 pages;
hardcover, \$19.99



Lippincott’s latest *New York Times* bestseller is a sapphic time-bending

homage to Regency romance, à la

Lost in Austen. The story opens on parallel tracks: In 2023 Pittsburgh, graduating senior Audrey Cameron is depressed over a recent breakup and being waitlisted at her dream art school. In 1812 England, Lucy Sinclair is dreading the loveless marriage of convenience that her tyrannical father has arranged for her.

In a sci-fi twist, past and present converge as Audrey is catapulted into Lucy’s timeline. First laying eyes on the strange visitor, Lucy thinks, “I have never seen clothes like hers before. Is she ... in her undergarments?” (43). Taking in her new—or rather old—surroundings, Audrey wonders, “What in the fresh reenactment hell is this? ... Are you Amish?” (44–47). The fish-out-of-water hijinks only get more outlandish from there.

The novel pokes fun at Anglophilia and pop-culture obsessions from *Downton Abbey* and *Bridgerton* to *The Great British Bake Off* and, yes, Austen adaptations. Subjected to a corset for the first time, Audrey “pray[s] to Jane Austen herself for strength” (77); but once

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Background: Barbara: We have two children, who are constantly being bombarded with something to do with Jane Austen. I am a lawyer, doing “happy law” (wills, estates, and real estate—no litigation) for the past 35 years, working from home for the past 30. I belong to a couple of women’s groups and a book club and co-run a local Austen group where we live, since our region is two hours away. Last November, we hosted 14 people for an Austen murder-mystery dinner.

Sigmund: I am a pilot in the Canadian Armed Forces and in civilian life, where I flew for regional airlines, trained RCAF pilots, fly for Hope Air as a volunteer pilot transporting patients in need of medical treatment, and serve as the director of British Columbia and Yukon for the Canadian Owners and Pilots Association. I’m also a lifelong educator, having taught secondary school.

Other passions/interests: Barbara: I love to design and create my Regency outfits to wear to Austen events. I also collect vintage clothing and costume jewelry.

Sigmund: I enjoy traveling, especially annually to the Jane Austen Bath Festival with Barbara while visiting family in the U.K. and Denmark. I fly my own airplane whenever I can and am a freelance flight instructor training pilots in addition to my RCAF flying.

Favorite Austen work/character: Barbara: Elizabeth Bennet. Like me, she loves the outdoors and walking, is amiable, outgoing, and sometimes opinionated, obstinate and headstrong when needed.

Sigmund: It’s early days for me so as of now my favorite is *P&P* with my favorite character being Elizabeth Bennet as she reminds me fondly of Barbara.

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she’s in her full gown, “there’s no denying I feel kind of unexpectedly cool right now. Like I’m Keira Knightley in a period drama, about to gaze forlornly out a window or cry a single tear in a bumpy carriage” (79). And an encounter with a potential suitor recreates the famous Colin Firth/Mr. Darcy’s jumping-in-a-lake scene that launched a thousand memes.

While navigating 19th century life and trying to find her way back to the future, Audrey gains artistic inspiration and a fresh perspective. She also rekindles her passion for portrait painting: “Capturing real people, showing the parts of them they don’t think anyone sees” (155). Through her friendship (and possibly more) with Lucy, she realizes how many of her 21st century freedoms she’s taken for granted. A gifted pianist, Lucy can only dream of studying at a conservatory and playing professionally. “There are a lot of things I was forced to take lessons in when I was young to be deemed an ‘accomplished woman,’ but I’m not supposed to use them to actually accomplish anything,” she explains (134). Nevertheless, “Being able to play and create for myself, that’s what matters most,” she says (153).

There’s a delicious irony in the girls’ twinned coming-out journey—and not as debutantes. Audrey is keenly aware of her bad timing in

Other favorite authors/genres: Barbara: I love Jane Austen fan fiction (JAFF) and murder mysteries (Louise Penny, Ken Follett) and reading about history and fashion in the Regency period.

Sigmund: Robert A. Heinlein/science fiction

What are you reading now? Barbara: I am reading *Fayne* by Ann-Marie MacDonald, *The Covenant of Water* by Abraham Verghese, and *The Other Einstein* by Marie Benedict.

Sigmund: I’m reading *The Regency Years: During Which Jane Austen Writes, Napoleon Fights, Byron Makes Love, and Britain Becomes Modern* by Robert Morrison.

Fun facts: Barbara: We try to visit Austen sites on our trips to England each year. I always say that Austen made me read, exercise (as I read JAFF when on the exercise machine), and sew! I have learned so much from being a member of JASNA.

Sigmund: I love the country dancing at any Austen event, and I particularly enjoy participating in the production of Austen’s works! Having grown up in a house with six sisters and five brothers, I was fortunate to have my sisters’ insights, which gave me greater awareness and appreciation for the history of women in society and the desire to help ensure all are equal partners.

falling for Lucy: “Only I would have a full-on bisexual awakening in 1812. For a soon-to-be-married woman” (190). Contemporary readers and viewers tend to romanticize all things Regency, but Lippincott reminds us of the era’s cruel and restrictive reality for women and anyone living on the margins. *Pride and Prejudice and Pittsburgh* is a kind of gender-flipped fairy tale, in which the two princesses awaken from their slumbers of compulsory heterosexuality—no prince needed. When the spell is broken, they see each other and themselves not as society believes they should be, but as they really are. Dancing together to a Whitney Houston song on her quickly draining iPhone, Audrey thinks, “And all at once, [Lucy] isn’t the prim-and-proper girl I pinned her to be, the image of the 1812 lady I’ve studied in history books or novels. ... She’s real” (95–96).

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