

EMMA WOODHOUSE KNIGHTLEY ON THE CASE

Murder in Highbury

by Vanessa Kelly
Kensington (2024), 400 pages
Hardcover, \$27

Review by J. A. Hennrikus

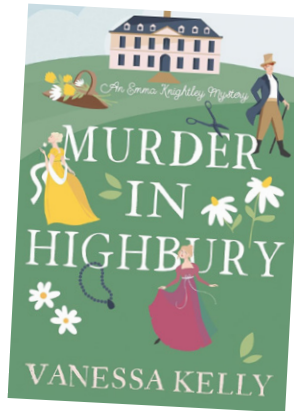
There are almost as many subgenres of crime novels as there are Jane Austen pastiches. Each subgenre has its own set of rules and tropes. *Murder in Highbury* belongs to the amateur sleuth subgenre, which precludes excessive violence or sex but insists that justice must prevail and order be restored. It's perfectly fine if the sleuth has a relationship with a police officer or person close to the investigation. A community of secondary characters, some of whom become suspects and others sidekicks, is also a requirement.

The tricky part for an author is that the amateur detective needs a good reason for investigating crimes. Readers are willing to take a leap, but they need a credible place to land. In selecting Emma Woodhouse Knightley as her sleuth, Vanessa Kelly chose the perfect Austen character. Emma is a busybody who knows everyone. She's comfortable inserting herself into situations. She cares about her village. She's also prone to jumping to the wrong conclusion, which has the effect of keeping readers off balance and confused—all the better to surprise them with the denouement of the story.

Emma is thrust into the mystery when she and her friend Harriet Martin discover the body of Mrs. Augusta Elton in the church. The marks on her neck and the blood near her head indicate that, indeed, Mrs. Elton has been murdered. Sending Harriet to get the doctor, Emma begins to investigate right away despite possible peril to her person. "Ignoring the warning voice in her head—which sounded remarkably like her husband's—she hurried up to the altar and grabbed one of the brass candlesticks" (12). This impulsive behavior sets the tone of Emma's investigative technique. Emma's husband, George Knightley, is the magistrate, so he is close to the investigation and quickly on the scene, ready to act as Watson to Emma's Holmes.

A good mystery needs a strong suspect pool. Mrs. Elton had several people who wished her ill, so the list is built early. In fact, Emma would likely have been on it if she and Harriet weren't each other's alibis. Some new characters with strong motives are introduced, including Mrs. Elton's brother-in-law. When Miss Bates becomes the prime suspect, Emma shifts into gear. To be fair, she would likely have investigated anyway, but the stakes are raised when her friend's reputation is at risk.

The premise for this first book in a series is fun. But familiarity with Austen's *Emma* is definitely an advantage. Revisiting Austen's



characters in *Murder at Highbury* reminds the reader of their foibles. Miss Bates still talks too much. Harriet dithers. Mr. Woodhouse is exhausting. Emma exasperates Knightley. Social commentary is lost to the necessities of the mystery, but knowing the source material adds to the enjoyment.

For the most part, the book delivers on its promise. There's a mystery, and it's solved. The ending isn't necessarily surprising, but it is shocking. The investigation feels slow at points, due perhaps to the constraints of sleuthing in Austen's era plus the challenges of a woman detective in the early 19th century.

Kelly has established her new series in this book, making slight changes in Highbury and its residents to indicate that anything is possible and that characters will evolve in ways that are more in the spirit of *Emma* than a faithful adaptation. Highbury is a small village that will require more visitors to support a series of mysteries, both for victims and for suspects. But we can all feel certain that Emma Woodhouse Knightley will remain on the case, and social chaos will ensue.

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QUEER YA GRAPHIC NOVELS

Reviews by Emma Kantor

Last year brought a pair of young adult graphic novels—one historical and one contemporary—inspired by Jane Austen. Both offer inclusive takes on the rom-com genre, with a vibrant cast of LGBTQ+ characters more at home in a comic book than a conduct book.

Mismatched: A Modern Graphic Retelling of Emma

By Anne Camlin, Illustrated
by Isadora Zeferino, Colors
by Jess Lome
Little, Brown Ink (2024),
264 pages
Paperback, \$17.99/
hardcover, \$24.99

The hero of Anne Camlin's modern-day *Emma* homage is here and queer, with a vast



and supportive social network (“I have 39,000 followers on Insta. ... I don’t follow back” (1)). His confidence—often crossing over into arrogance—is clear from the opening narration, directly addressing the reader: “‘What’s your secret?’ you ask, because you know greatness when you see it. It’s simple: If you want to be the king, then act like one. Or, in my case, you might want to be the queen” (1–2). Evan Horowitz reigns over his Queens, N.Y., high school with all the self-assurance of another haughty Horowitz teen: Cher from *Clueless*. Only his best friend, Davi, calls Evan out for his snobbery and mockingly calls him “Your Highness” (4).

When shy and awkward transfer student Natalia stumbles into Evan’s orbit, he can’t resist the urge to play social director. In a cringey series of panels, he subjects Natalia to a makeover, causing her to break out in hives. He also pressures her to avoid the school’s anime and manga club, and by extension her crush, Sadie, because it would be “the kiss of death for your reputation” (33). Instead, he recruits Natalia for the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), of which he’s president, and pushes her toward fellow member Dennis. In the odd moments when he isn’t busy matchmaking, Evan flirts and gossips with charming but cagey classmate Luca. As the friends plan for the end-of-year Rainbow Prom, misunderstandings and romantic misfires bring tensions to the surface.

Beneath the pastel, pretty-in-pink artwork by Zeferino, the story has darker undertones. Luca’s deception takes a real toll on the mental health of his secret partner, Aryan. And while Evan is out and proud, with a family that loves him for who he is, others in the GSA aren’t as fortunate in their home lives.

Through it all, Davi proves to be a loyal friend who keeps Evan accountable—and reminds him to check his privilege. Evan gets the boy in the end, but he’s also humbled, as he realizes: “It turns out I know nothing about anything” (255).

Although the plot adheres predictably to the original Austen novel, readers of other YA *Emma* modernizations, such as *Emmett* by L. C. Rosen and *Fresh* by Margot Wood, will admire Camlin’s expansive vision of young love.

I Shall Never Fall in Love

**By Hari Conner, HarperAlley (2024),
288 pages; paperback, \$18.99/
hardcover, \$26.99**

“Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! but I have never been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall. And, without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine.” So declares Austen’s Emma Woodhouse. “Handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home,” she can afford to turn her nose up at marriage—at least, until her heart compels otherwise.



Similarly, Eleanor, the well-to-do heroine of Hari Conner’s Regency-set graphic novel, “has no inclination to marry” (272). Instead, she busies herself with tending to her widowed father—a worrywart cut from the same cloth as Mr. Woodhouse—and meddling in her friend Sophie and cousin Charlotte’s courtship plots, with predictably disastrous results.

Eleanor’s best friend, George Kingsley, “was born Georgiana and proclaimed—A girl!—though they had mixed feelings on the matter” (6). A lifelong tomboy, George takes an active interest in the management of the family estate and its tenants—behaving more like the firstborn son than their elder brother, John. Guided by a strong code of ethics and knowing what it’s like to live in the margins, they refuse to have their business tied up with slave labor, no matter how much pressure they face from their financial advisers.

When Eleanor, Charlotte, and George venture to London for the season, diverging experiences related to their gender identity, sexuality, and race put a strain on the trio’s dynamic. As a biracial woman, Charlotte is acutely aware of “the incalculable suffering upon which the empire is built” (43), and deals with discrimination from suitors, something Eleanor can’t seem to understand. And as George awakens to their attraction to women, including a longtime crush on Eleanor, they withdraw from their friends in order to shield them from possible scandal. Lonely and jealous, Eleanor reexamines her feelings for George.

Working in the comics format, Conner makes adept use of visual cues such as body language and facial expressions to reveal the characters’ true feelings, with blushing, hand-brushing, and stolen glances galore. Though George and Eleanor’s slow-burn romance can’t end with a conventional wedding, the couple enjoys a private happily ever after in the safety of their shared home.

In an afterword, Conner affirms that LGBTQ+ individuals “have always existed, through all different cultures and periods of history” (274), sharing some of their research. The author also notes the impact of real-life Regency rebel Anne Lister, dubbed “Gentleman Jack” for her binary-bucking lifestyle and relationships with women. *I Shall Never Fall in Love* is a celebration of love and self-love, and a perfect match for fans of Kate Beaton’s *Hark! A Vagrant* literary and historical comics.

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