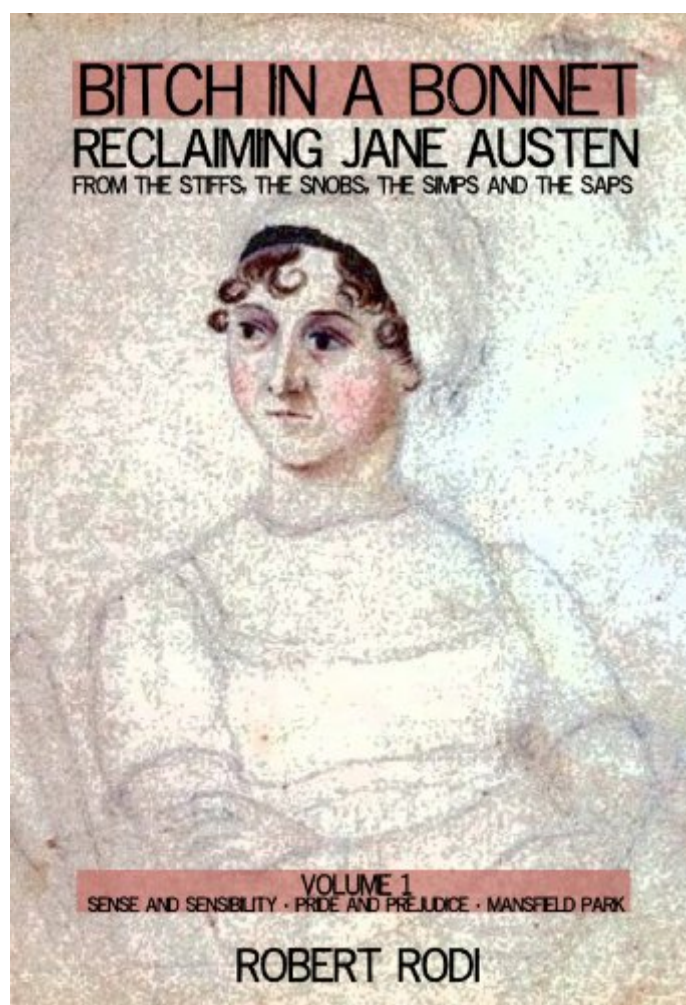


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Bitch In A Bonnet: Reclaiming Jane Austen From The Stiffs, The Snobs, The Simps And The Saps (Volume 1)



Synopsis

Novelist Rodi (Fag Hag, The Sugarman Bootlegs) launches a broadside against the depiction of Jane Austen as a “a woman” writer “quaint and darling, doe-eyed and demure, parochial if not pastoral, and dizzily, swooningly romantic” the inventor and mother goddess of “Echick lit.” Instead he sees her as “a sly subversive, a clear-eyed social Darwinist, and the most unsparing satirist of her century” She takes sharp, swift swipes at the social structure and leaves it, not lethally wounded, but shorn of its prettifying garb, its flabby flesh exposed in all its naked grossness. And then she laughs. In this volume, which collects and amplifies two-and-a-half years’ worth of blog entries, he combs through the first three novels in Austen’s canon • Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and Mansfield Park • with the aim of charting her growth as both a novelist and a humorist, and of shattering the notion that she’s a romantic of any kind (“Weddings bore her, and the unrelenting vulgarity of our modern wedding industry • which strives to turn each marriage ceremony into the kind of blockbuster apotheosis that makes grand opera look like a campfire sing along • would appall her into derisive laughter”). “Hilarious” Rodi’s title is a tribute. He’s angry that the Austen craze has defanged a novelist who’s wicked, arch, and utterly merciless. She skewers the pompous, the pious, and the libidinous with the animal glee of a natural-born sadist. Like Rodi, I believe Austen deserves to join the grand pantheon of gadflies: Voltaire and Swift, Twain and Mencken. • Lev Raphael, The Huffington Post

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Customer Reviews

I laughed a lot at first. He's right that Austen is mordant as opposed to romantic or Romantic. But he ends up doing her wit a great disservice by constantly comparing some of her most quietly lethal comments to blunt-force contemporary sarcasm that are already dated and that show that his ear for the vernacular isn't all we might wish. ("Beeyotch, are you high," really?) The guy genuinely knows his stuff but once he gets into *Pride and Prejudice*, he starts to dance around so hard trying to be funny or appeal to youth that he becomes what he and Jane mock, prancing like a poodle, spinning like a top, and peeing all over his own points. In trying to emulate the vernacular of the many genuinely witty contemporary writers, he tosses in the odd hilariously dated pop culture reference and the curiously out of synch odd occasional bit of British slang. I liked a lot of it but the author needs to step out of Jane Austen's way. Her wit isn't analogous to the blunt instruments that writers today wield in a spirit of pure irony. They are funny and so is she, but in different ways and for different reasons. In fact, she is hilarious and amazing because her characters, though often monsters of ego, are also entirely like real people. Comparing them to cartoon characters, characters in Fellini films, and various modern types completely misses the point. It's ludicrous because her characters are the OPPOSITE of those things. So I recommend these books to all true Austen fans--though with certain caveats. B

I would like to give this a much higher rating. Rodi does show signs of understanding literary criticism. That being said, he seems to think his reader is entirely ignorant about Jane Austen. I question his assumption that all of her readers are ignorant romance fans. Personally, I think Austen's ability to write tongue in cheek and her social satire can be perceived by any reasonably intelligent reader. She is accessible, even in the 21st century. Rodi thinks a great deal of his own capabilities apparently. He seems quite taken with his rather adolescent humor and coarse analogies. Another reviewer mentions his taking the Lord's name in vain. I should have paid

attention. How bad could it be? One of his favorite ejaculations is "sweet creeping J---s!" That's his tone. Lastly, although under coarseness and literary mugging, there is evidence of genuine literary criticism which I am bound to admit. However, his interpretation of Mansfield Park is so bizarre that I felt obliged to re-read the book as I scarcely recognized the characters in his criticism. Rodi makes the very mistake he accuses others of making. That is of viewing a 19th century novel with 21st century eyes. His lambasting of Fanny Price is ridiculous. Read a little more carefully and the clues to her behavior are there. Bringing in slavery in the West Indies is off the mark. Whether or not Sir Thomas had slaves on his Antigua property is not relevant to the story. He could have been having management problems, crop failure, trade agreements falling apart ... Austen does not specify. Non issue. Divorce in the family? Mary's solution was perfectly practical to Rodi, what's the problem? Early 19th century -- adultery and divorce, huge scandals. Image was everything. I will not be buying volume two.

This litcrit is well-written and funny, but here's the trouble: I spy a wee thread of sexism. Rodi is right - there is a "Jane Austen" that is not the same as Jane Austen, a tamed version that lives in people's minds and is associated primarily with romance, and the impulse to push the real Austen forward at the people who can only gush over her ~*~heroes~*~ and their associated most dramatic moments (or wet shirt scenes. To go off on a tangent, it seems immeasurably hypocritical that nobody these days says anything against Colin Firth in a wet shirt, but all hints of eroticism in newer adaptations get pooh-poohed as pandering). However, he presents himself as the sole voice of reason when there are many people in Jane Austen's fandom, mostly women, who are well aware that she was primarily writing comedies of manners, satires on human behavior. And at the same time, when he rails against romance novels and films ("... and Austen, the supposed progenitor of "Regency romance", the patron saint of "chick lit", the inspiration for who even knows how many craptacular costume dramas with dewy close-ups of heaving bazoos and quivering lips ...") I detect even more revulsion for the people (again, primarily women) who enjoy them. What is it that makes these costume dramas craptacular? Apparently, nothing except their focus on a dramatic romantic storyline. I cannot speak for everyone who discusses Austen's place in the ancestry of the romance novel, but it seems to me that there *is* a general understanding out there that she did not single-handedly give birth to the genre. Her female-character-centric novels partly inspired Georgette Heyer and other writers to write the original "traditional" Regency romances, which then led to the more dramatic and far more erotic romance novels of today. She was not writing romance novels herself, but she did help to set the stage for the romance novel down the line. You can

complain about the connection if you wish, but you're simply off the rails if you think Austen's got nothing to do with romance novels just because she was also writing satirically - and if part of your reasoning is that the romance genre is wholly sub-standard, then there are even more issues. The text itself was a great read, sort of like sitting down with a sharp-witted friend to discuss the novels, with the occasional typo (eg, "Willoughy" for "Willoughby") or accidental factual error (eg, calling Marianne Mrs. Dashwood's youngest daughter). There's just this recurring feeling that he's telling the ladies to sit down and listen that makes me unable to give more than three stars. ETA: At the time I wrote the above review, I had only read the first third of the book, on Sense & Sensibility, and I assumed I would feel the same about the rest. I was incorrect.

Re: Pride & Prejudice's section: Rodi's enthusiasm and love for the book shined through. However, his overblown, hysterical reactions and the way he keeps saying that various characters are feeling tempted to commit violence made me start to think Austen could have written him as one of her caricatures. Something along the lines of Isabella Thorpe, only with the addition of the repeated "look how manly I am/my reading is" strain.

Re: Mansfield Park's section: My feelings here are no longer mixed at all. In fact, they've gone from "I wouldn't recommend it but I wouldn't dissuade anyone from reading it" to "NO", and the rating lost a star. The main problem is that, in verbally demolishing Fanny Price, Rodi has a) demolished his own premise that Jane Austen was not writing "chick-lit" or romance and b) failed to take Austen's society into account. By this point, he has invented his own Austen brand to compete with the supposedly overwhelmingly prevalent "romance novelist Austen" one, and appears upset that in Mansfield Park the real Austen does not line up with his brand. Perhaps the most striking instance of this was the assertion that Austen wrote MP as penance, deliberately suffering to atone for writing the super-sparkly-awesome Elizabeth Bennet, closely followed by the rather shocking idea that the reader is meant to hate Mary Crawford as the rival. Really? Because the idea that a rival must be hateful simply for being different from the heroine seems like one that's pervasive in romance novels and chick-lit, to me. Same as the desire to see two differing personalities who have tension together end up married.

Fanny Price is a difficult girl to love. She's not the stuff of which heroines are made; a lot of them start out small and downtrodden, but these days it's well-known that an oppressed girl needs to burst from her shell and shock everyone with her vibrant true self. Fanny doesn't, which automatically makes her worthwhile for looking deeper as something of an anomaly. Rodi maintains that the narration is lying, and that Fanny is in fact a big old hypocrite who enjoys ruining people's fun. The fact is, Fanny's behavior has been molded by years of emotional abuse. She gets fluttery at the thought of attention being paid to her and carriages being summoned for her because she's been trained by just about every member of her family to think that she

doesn't deserve that, and that if she gets it it will be accompanied by criticism and slights (and probably Aunt Norris's screeching). Not to mention that she seems to have a decent helping of social anxiety, which doesn't appear to cross Rodi's mind. Fanny gets lambasted for her trepidation at approaching the door to her uncle's study - but I have to say that I've felt much the same thing when I come to a closed door that I know I have to knock on in order to have a nerve-wracking interview (or to make a phone call that I'm dreading - Fanny, be thankful you haven't one of those). Now, maybe I really am the cringing worm Fanny's made out to be here - or maybe Rodi is being extraordinarily self-centered. And my last point, regarding the social mores that Rodi completely overlooks. In Austen's day, acting was extremely improper, especially for women. It was all right to do staged readings of Shakespeare within your own family or close friends, but memorizing lines? Getting costumes and scenery together? Inviting strangers to participate? Fanny is completely in the right for opposing it; she'll give in far enough to help out and can even take pleasure in listening to the others (Austen herself liked amateur theatricals in her family circle), but the fact that she won't give in all the way is actually a testament to her integrity. Likewise, it was extremely improper for a young man to give a gift to a young woman outside of an engagement. Mary sneaking the chain into Fanny's hands was wrong. It seems priggish to the modern reader, but there it is. Mary comes off as a strikingly modern character and it's tough to find any visceral reaction to her being ready to perform a love scene with Edmund, speaking slightly of her brother-in-law and the clergy and admirals (and making sodomy puns), tricking Fanny - yet these are things that, according to the society the characters and author lived in, would be seen as character flaws, even when they went with an extremely charming personality. You don't have to like it, but you can't pretend to address the author's intentions without considering that.

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