



The best books ever written

Growing up, as measured in units of Austen by Karen Joy Fowler.

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When I was in high school, I had a crush on a boy. This would have been around 1966 or 7. We had a class together and some mutual friends. Occasionally we would both be at the same house with the same group of kids after school. I was very, very careful to do nothing to betray to anyone the fact that I liked him.

I was not the only one who did; I believe there were at least three of us, all equally circumspect, so I'm only guessing. But then there was a fourth, one girl who made no secret of her interest. While the rest of us watched in dismay and disapproval, she pursued. She insisted on sitting next to him when seats were taken, on his lap in a crowded car. If he said he was going somewhere, she immediately tagged along.

She called him at his home. We called each other at our homes to discuss all this in some detail. It was embarrassing to see. And very stupid of her. If there was one thing we knew for sure it was that boys didn't like to be chased.

Our disapproval changed to outrage when they became a couple. In our minds, the rest of us had been playing by the rules. This other girl had simply, straightforwardly said what she wanted. In what world did that work for women? She'd won by cheating.

Reader, she married him. It was as if Mr. Darcy had chosen Lydia Bennet instead of Elizabeth.

I was about fourteen when I read my first Austen novel. I can't remember which one it was; I finished several in short order. I was pleased to find them easy to read and silly enough to credit myself with that instead of Austen. I fell easily into the rhythm of her sentences and her world made sense to me. More than that, it felt familiar.

In those early readings, I noticed none of the things in her books that interest me now. I was charmed by her young heroines and their struggles for love. Austen and I were all about romance and we shared some ideas about how that worked.

In the world where I grew up, girls came into the sixties having been taught that happiness was achieved by following the rules, that deviation from the rules would result in ruin and regret. Should you kiss a boy goodnight? Sure thing (from an advice column in *Seventeen* magazine) "just as long as you're willing to run the risk of having yourself foot-noted as an 'easy number.'" Just as long as you never planned to marry some nice boy someday.

We left the sixties in quite a different frame of mind.

I went to college. I took a class in Rhetoric where the professor told us it wasn't in a woman's nature to get her way by constructing a persuasive argument. Fortunately, he said, women had

alternatives to logic. We were pretty young girls; he didn't understand why any of us were taking his class. I took a class in genetics with a section on primate behavior. Female primates were covered in a single paragraph. "Immersed in the tasks of procreation and motherhood -- let's be honest," the professor said. "Not very interesting."

Also not very interesting -- female writers. There was a sad lack of war, prostitution, and drunken debauchery -- the real stuff of life -- in their books. They didn't even do women very well, being too competitive to let another woman, even fictionally, look good. Only a few of these authors escaped censure, those who knew their place and stuck to it. Those who wrote little books, and occasionally little masterpieces. Austen fell into this last category.

I reread Austen during those years, not in my classes, but on my own. I found that her books had utterly transformed. They weren't romances at all. Instead they were about the controlling force of economics on the intimate lives of women.

How could I ever have thought there was nothing more at stake in these books than some 19th century version of a date for the prom? I should have paid more attention to Charlotte Lucas' marriage to Reverend Collins, to the sad story of Fanny Price's mother. This time through, I saw women fighting for their lives in a rigged game. Though a few managed, through marriage, to snatch a genuine hope of happiness, even among the heroines many were merely making the best of a bad bargain.

Is the romance plot reactionary or revolutionary, I asked myself. How much freedom can a woman expect to enjoy in her own home? Is sexual promiscuity a tactic of liberation or does it play right into the hands (so to speak) of the patriarchy?

Paradoxically, these were also the readings in which I first noticed how funny Austen is.

The third time I read Austen I was a mother with two small children. Here's how busy I was: in the first year of my son's life, while I nursed, I made mental lists of everything that had to be accomplished that day. I divided this list into items that could be done one-handed and items required both. This was so I wouldn't waste his valuable nap time on something I could have done while holding him. I was so tired I could only manage to read books I'd already read.

But once again Austen's had changed on me. This time through, they were clearly more about family than about courtship. How unsatisfactory the parents in her books are! The mothers are dead or silly. The fathers are vain or fussy or drunkards or absent or absent-minded. This time through, I noticed servants in the shadowy corners of the books, cooking the meals, helping the heroine dress, minding the children. Her principal characters were left with so little to do. Had anyone anywhere ever enjoyed so much free time?

(Me, of course. As a child, back in school, and back when I first read her. Back when I had long afternoons, long weekends, long summers to myself. Meals appeared on the table, clean clothes in the closet. I remembered nostalgically how it felt to be bored. And more of the same had been promised. We'd been told we were on the verge of copious amounts of leisure time all made possible by the advance of technology. In one high school class I was actually assigned a paper on the looming leisure problem. Part one: what societal issues did I foresee in this future where we'd all have nothing to do? Part two: what were my solutions?)

The Austen heroine went for walks, practiced the piano. She wrote letters, visited friends, rode horses if her health required it, went on picnics, did riddles, refused to participate in amateur theatricals. It hardly filled a single day.

This time when I read Austen it all took place in some world lost a very long time ago. The women in it were trapped and constricted, just as I'd thought, but also privileged. Once again, Austen

proved more complicated than I'd realized.

I still reread Austen every few years. I always find surprises, but the books have settled on me (except for maybe *Mansfield Park*) and no longer turn completely upside down and inside out with each rereading. What I like best about Austen now is Austen. I love her voice, her observation, her wit. I read her just to spend that time with her. The older I get, the smarter she looks.

In the last few months, I've heard from many, many readers who love Austen (and quite a few who don't. They generally begin by apologizing. I'm forced to forgive them.) Some of the former love her in a nostalgic way. They don't care for updated versions. They want books with genteel language, quiet plots. We live in an ugly world. They want no part of it.

Others read her in the same way they'd read a fantasy novel, like Tolkien if only *The Lord of the Rings* had women in it. They read her to go somewhere exotic. And others tell me that we still live in Austen's world. They recognize the characters. They recognize the rules. We're fooling ourselves, they say, if we think anything has really changed.

Rather than settle the question, I've chosen to simply admire Austen for managing to provide so many completely contradictory things to so many completely different people. Which reading is the right one? All of the above and more. As a writer, I often ask myself how she does this. As a reader I don't care that I can't answer.

