

Middle Sister Melodrama— The Gothic Perils Of Mary Bennet

The Independence of Miss Mary Bennet

By Colleen McCullough.
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Reviewed by Diana Birchall.

To borrow from Mary Bennet's sister Elizabeth, "I hear such different accounts of [this book] as puzzle me exceedingly." The word on the street is that it has deficiencies as a sequel because it alters elements from its mother novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, in ways shocking to Janeites. However, such allegations need not affect its merits as a novel, so like Mary Crawford "with a fearless face and bold voice," or at any rate, an open mind, we approach it.

At first you feel you are in the hands of a master storyteller, a writer of a different caliber than most sequellists. McCullough's opening, when she introduces the spinster Mary Bennet, at the very moment of her mother's death, is promising. Now thirty-eight, and having sacrificed her youth to be the irritating Mrs. Bennet's companion and caretaker, Mary is a mature heroine who has learned to think for herself. It is not inconceivable that the Mary Bennet we know from *Pride and Prejudice*, pedantic and inappropriate as she was, might develop in such a way after years of observation, reading, and patience, and strike out with remarkable independence even in a pre-feminist age.

Yet a constellation of troublingly profound inconsistencies quickly crops up. For example, Mary, who as a girl was

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the plainest of the sisters, is now said to have had "suppurating spots . . . and a front tooth that grew sideways." Her flaws are corrected, and she emerges as a startling beauty with violet eyes who closely resembles Elizabeth. (Elizabeth Taylor maybe?)

Such oddities might be seen as satire of romance novels. But other variances of the characters are more painful. Both Elizabeth's and Jane's marriages turn out bitterly. Mr. Darcy (bizarrely called "Fitz" by virtually everyone) has not only metamorphosed into a tyrant who has fallen out of love with Elizabeth, but Jane is even more sadly mistreated by a newly vicious Mr. Bingley. Did McCullough have to invent a Jamaican plantation for Bingley, complete with mistresses, while he manages to keep Jane a perpetually pregnant, "poor animal"? This hardly seems like the kind and gentle Charles Bingley we know. And when Lizzy tells Jane, "What an obsequious crawler of a wife you must be, Jane!" we know we have left any possible paraworld of *Pride and Prejudice* far, far behind.

With such blatant offenses against credulity, we can come to only one conclusion: Colleen McCullough is having a joke. Whether it is on us, on Austen, or on the romance and sequel genres, all would be fair game, except that she fails to make her ludicrous leaps funny. Rather, they are mean-spirited and menacing.

If you read the novel not as a sequel or homage to *Pride and Prejudice*, but as one that takes the names and lives of the Austen characters merely as a starting place to invent a novel about the nineteenth century, it may help prevent a case of Janeitis Irritabilis. At least there is some pleasure in reading about the stubbornly independent Mary, who refuses to live as a servile dependent of the domineering Fitz.

The plot is something of a post-chaise wreck. It rambles and contains chunks of undigested period research that are not formed into convincing drama. What

may have begun as a send-up of Gothic melodrama reads as if McCullough researched religious cults and Sawny Bean type murders and stuffed them all into a concoction in which the *Pride and Prejudice* folk wander through underground cave prisons with a tribe of child slaves and their evil Rasputin-like master. You start to wonder if McCullough, a past mistress of narrative, has lost her reason.

The rational world of Austen's novels is transformed into virtual anarchy. We may consider with longing Henry Tilney's famous exclamation, "Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians." The fantastically mad world where the prosaic Mary Bennet, of all people, suffers a string of melodramatic assaults, is absurd. Perhaps that is the joke? But instead of laughing, we plod through the dreary atrocities inflicted on the Jane Austen landscape. We have a Mr. Darcy whose father is an evil man who "ran dens of thieves, cutthroats—and brothels!" (This would be the same Mr. Darcy senior described in *Pride and Prejudice* as "all that was benevolent and amiable.") Fitz disdains his own children (odd, when the original is tenderly devoted to his sister) and is annoyed by Elizabeth's teasing (which in truth, she does not perform with the wit of Austen's heroine), while Mary drivels about "self-esteem." McCullough has thrown away the opportunity for making something interesting of the story of a mature and determined nineteenth-century feminist by plunging her grotesquely into sensationally unfunny situations. Had the author deliberately tried to tear apart and destroy the peace of the source novel, she could not have done it more thoroughly.

