

Modernizing Emma

Emma: A Modern Retelling

By Alexander McCall Smith.

Pantheon. 2014. 369 pages.

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Review by Nora Foster Stovel.

How can one improve on Jane Austen? Well, one cannot. One can, however, modernize her—which is what Joanna Trollope did in her *Sense and Sensibility*, which I had the pleasure of reviewing recently for *JASNA News*, and which Alexander McCall Smith has done in his new *Emma*, subtitled *A Modern Retelling*, published in 2014. Both novels are part of an ingenious HarperCollins project for retelling the stories of Austen's six novels in modern settings, which was launched in 2013 with Trollope's *Sense and Sensibility*, and followed in 2014 by Val McDermid's *Northanger Abbey*, and Smith's *Emma*. Janeites must wait with bated breath to discover the authors of the remaining three modernizations.

I intend to demonstrate how Smith modernizes, or at least changes, Austen's *Emma*. Electronic gadgets are to be expected, of course: Emma and Harriet telephone and text each other. Mr. John

Knightley is transformed into a London photographer who whisks Isabella away from Hartfield to London on his Ducati, while Emma drives a Mini Cooper, and Mr. Weston a Land Rover. Whereas Trollope plays metafictionally with the change in manners, having characters comment, "You're like those nineteenth-century novels," and "this isn't 1810, for God's sake," Smith does not apologize for the inevitable disconnect between Regency morals and modern manners, creating a sense of anachronism.

The major way Smith changes Austen's narrative is to fill in characters' backstories. He begins, for example, with the birth of Mr. Woodhouse during the Cuban missile crisis. No wonder he is anxious and resorts to fourteen vitamin and herbal supplements daily under the advice of Mr. Perry, who touts the efficacy of Echinacea.

Indeed, Mr. Woodhouse, who finds himself a widower with two daughters to raise, selects Miss Anne Taylor of St. Andrews College and Edinburgh, as a governess, based on the last word in her advert—"vegetarian." His preference is confirmed, as, when offered tea following the interview, she expresses a preference for "camomile."

Mr. Woodhouse, known as "Pops" to Emma and as "Woody" to Floss Goddard, an "ageing hippy," suggesting a previous relationship, is an inventor—a design engineer who invents a valve that makes his fortune, allowing him to restore Hartfield.

To modernize the narrative, Smith injects issues such as global warming, and attempts to psychologize Austen's characters. For example, James Weston, whose low blood pressure and resting heart rate are the envy of Mr. Woodhouse, consults a psychotherapist regarding his sense of guilt at allowing the Churchills to adopt Frank.

Emma and Jane Fairfax both attend university—Emma the University of Bath, and Jane, to Emma's chagrin, the University of Cambridge. Frank

Churchill's backstory is revolutionized, as the Churchills emigrate to Australia, or "Oz," as Frank labels it, to set up a winery. Frank asks Emma if he can flirt with her as a cover for the fact that he is gay. To discover whether Frank really is gay, Janeites will have to read Smith's novel.

Smith gets it right most of the time, although anyone who has ever played the piano will shudder at his depiction of Jane Fairfax wearing bangles while playing. He has Philip Elton, characterized as a "young fogey" pursuing a Ph.D. in Byzantine history, run his BMW into a ditch following his contretemps with Emma, and receive a DUI conviction that strips him of his license, triggering the headline, "Boozy Rev Revs Up and Ends in Ditch." Then Smith has him marry Hazel, a blonde, buxom Edith Piaf impersonator of "C-list celebrity status." Surely Mr. Elton is too much of a pompous climber to descend so low.

Readers, however, will be appalled at a major omission—a disgraceful lack of dancing: not only is there no dancing at the Coles' party, there are no Coles and no party. Most shameful of all, there is no Crown Inn Ball—not even the equivalent of a nightclub, disco, or frat party.

And the way he concludes the novel. But that would be telling. Or should that be retelling?

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B E M I N E

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