

Kathleen Flynn, *The Jane Austen Project*

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Kathleen Flynn's novel is based on an intriguing premise: set in the future, two time-travelers, Rachel and Liam, are sent to 1815 England to meet Jane Austen and recover her completed yet unpublished manuscript of *The Watsons*. Masquerading as William and Mary Ravenswood, a brother and sister from the West Indies with forged money and letters of introduction, Rachel and Liam become entangled with each other, their assumed identities, and the Austen family more profoundly than either of them expected. As their mission becomes more complicated and comes to an end, Rachel questions her actions and motivations in the past, and wonders what her future will be.

As a story, *The Jane Austen Project* is compelling: in addition to starring Jane Austen herself, the novel features a feisty heroine, romance, and adventure. The time-travel plot, which I initially viewed with skepticism, is an ingenious way of writing about Austen. Literary adaptations of Austen generally fall into one of two categories: sequels and secret histories of Austen's life and novels that entrench readers in Regency England, or modernized retellings of Austen's novels. Austen's time and ours, so often kept separate, collide in Flynn's novel in ways that are both comic and tragic. The past and future are represented and contrasted artfully, for instance, through Flynn's description of food: the rich and savory food in Regency England surprises and delights the travelers, who are accustomed to the bland synthetic fare of the future after the "Die-off." Besides adjusting her palate, Rachel, a doctor and single woman from Brooklyn, struggles against the constraints of nineteenth-century English society that dictate she focus on sewing instead of surgery. Stuck in their rented London house, idle and impatient, Rachel ponders the options available to women: "Maid, mother, milliner, seamstress, housewife, midwife, fishwife, alewife, barmaid, whore. That was it, except for the odd actress or authoress" (99).

The exceptional woman on Rachel's mind is, of course, Jane Austen, whom Rachel and Liam have been scheming to meet. Having already befriended the beloved brother Henry, they arrive unannounced at his home one day, worried about his health, and find a surprise. Rachel observes, "Behind him was a slender woman, on the tall side, in a lace cap with a few curls spilling out. She had his nose, hazel eyes like his, and a quizzical expression that seemed right" (105). The long-anticipated meeting, understated yet dramatic, exemplifies Flynn's masterful depiction of Austen. Flynn manages to render Austen at once extraordinary and ordinary, both a genius author of remarkable novels and a proper nineteenth-century English woman who is concerned for her brother and wary of strangers.

Just as impressive as Flynn's portrayal of Austen is the way she depicts Rachel interacting with and reflecting about Austen. Rachel describes their first contact thus: "She inclined her head slightly and looked at me. Her eyes were bright, her gaze direct. I thought of meeting Eva Farmer: I had the same sense of being in the presence of a formidable intelligence, of feeling the air around us warped by the force of it" (105). In the eagerly awaited moment of meeting Austen, Rachel's mind wanders to the future and Eva Farmer, the brain behind the Jane Austen Project. Connections and contradictions between the past and future permeate Rachel's interactions with the Austens, which compel the reader to confront difficult issues instead of becoming completely absorbed in Austen's world.

Flynn examines people's desire to immerse themselves in Austen's world even as she pushes against it. In the future, Austen obsession has reached colossal proportions: her home "is the heart of a complex covering several thousand acres devoted to the author and her era" called Austenland (208); an entire time-travel mission is devoted

to recovering her manuscript and letters to Cassandra; and Rachel is hand-chosen by Eva Farmer because of her “*reverence for — Jane*” (51). “This hunger for all things Austen,” Rachel reflects, “was an aspect of my own world I’d taken for granted, but now it seemed both touching and demented” (208). The fanaticism — and familiarity — of Austen fandom in the novel urges readers to think about their own attraction to Austen, and, like Rachel, ask, “What was it that people wanted so badly from Jane Austen anyway? What did I myself want, for that matter?” (208).

While Flynn never definitively answers Rachel’s question, the novel suggests that Austen speaks to people’s deep-seated desire to figure out who they are in relationship to others. When Rachel arrives in 1815 England, her first thought is, “I had the feeling that follows a faint, or waking up in an unfamiliar bed after a long journey: uncertain not just where I was, but who” (1). She is also uncertain about Liam, her aloof colleague and former actor who assumes his persona with unsettling ease, but soon Rachel, too, feels like she’s becoming Mary Ravenswood and forgetting her former life and self. Despite their meticulous preparation, their position in Austen’s world is tenuous, and they live under constant worry that their story will unravel, especially under Austen’s discerning eye. One of the best lines in the novel is when Austen says of the Ravenswoods, “One can tell at a glance they are not truly English. They are so correctly, so perfectly English” (256). They find themselves in a double-bind: the flawlessness of their performance betrays the fact that it is a performance.

Austen’s statement evokes a larger concern of Flynn’s novel, as well as Austen’s novels: what is Englishness? Through her choice of protagonists, Flynn emphasizes that Englishness is often defined by what it is not. Rachel and Liam are clearly not English, both in the future and the past. Rachel is Jewish, a fact that she fears will be betrayed by her curly hair and distinctive nose, and Liam is ashamed of his poor Irish heritage as he strives to become a member of the “Old British,” who constitute a reemergence of the British empire of Austen’s time. Yet they manage to be “perfectly English,” convincing everyone except the perceptive Austen. The imitability and mutability of Englishness, and of identity in general, is one of the underlying issues addressed in Flynn’s novel.

The novel’s handling of important social and psychological issues makes it a worthwhile read for Austen scholars, who will also appreciate Flynn’s expertise with Austen’s works and their contexts. This novel could work well in a course on Austen adaptations by facilitating discussion of why and how people reimagine Austen. In addition to its scholarly and pedagogical appeal, *The Jane Austen Project* has plenty to offer casual readers: a suspenseful plot with plenty of mystery and romance. Readers will be entertained by Rachel’s complicated relationship with Liam, as well as her interactions with an unexpected admirer, as she negotiates between nineteenth-century and modern-day courtship with sensitivity and humor. They will sympathize with Rachel as she witnesses the progression of Austen’s illness, bound by an order not to interfere and change the course of history. Indeed, the tension between the past and the future is what makes the novel so enjoyable and generates its greatest insights.

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