

Jane Austen

Pride, not prejudice

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More than two centuries after readers first met them, Elizabeth and Darcy have yet to grow old. Their story has inspired erotic spinoffs, murder mysteries and a retelling from the servants' point of view. The much-loved 1995 Andrew Davies screen adaptation, starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth, helped birth Bridget Jones's Diary. Then came the "Hollywood-meets-Bollywood" movie *Bride and Prejudice* and even a genre mashup with zombie hordes menacing Pemberley.

Pride and Prejudice is the novel that simply will not die. Twenty million copies on, Mr Darcy has become so synonymous with the romantic hero that when researchers found a pheromone in male mouse urine irresistible to female mice, they named it "darcin".

Even that indignity has not diminished his allure. So the announcement this month of yet another TV adaptation was entirely predictable. So too was the accompanying reassurance that the novel is "less bonnet-y" than people imagine.

There is more than a tinge of sexism and snobbery in the idea that Austen's enduring popularity is evidence of something wrong rather than something right - it is, to be blunt, the sense that she is read by too many women, or at least the wrong kind of women. It's manifested, equally, in the implication that she must be OK because Winston Churchill and Harold Macmillan turned to her in moments of darkness.

Austen herself deemed *Pride and Prejudice* "rather too light and bright and sparkling"; to read it alongside other works does her more justice. She is merciless in dissecting human folly, of course, but also in her honesty. Her heroines often face grim choices, only lightly concealed by the gallantry and their happy endings. It is not a cosy environment, merely a contained one. Other writers, on a broader canvas, have shown us much less of the world than we see on what she termed her "little bit (two inches wide) of ivory". There is absolutely no need to apologise for Austen.