Selections From the New Book Room

Jane Austen in Boca / Paula Marantz Cohen
PS3603.O49 J36 2002

Jane Austen in Boca is Paula Marantz Cohen's first novel. Cohen, of Drexel University's Department of English and Philosophy, has published extensively on 19th-Century English literature; film and literature; and the concept of the daughter in literature. Her first venture into fiction has been met with general high regard. Library Journal calls her novel a "clever update of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice" and Publisher's Weekly terms it an "amusing, kvetchy take" on the same novel. It has also been chosen as a selection by the Book of the Month Club, who laud it as a "charming book" that serves as "a wonderful reminder that the desire for courtship and romance is as ageless as it is universal."

Set in a Jewish retirement community in Boca Raton, Florida, Austen's Bennett sisters have been transformed into elderly Jewish widows in need of husbands. May Newman is a "nice" lady who is at the mercy of her well-meaning but interfering daughter-in-law Carol from New Jersey. Carol fixes May up with a suitable widower with family connections, and even though problems arise, Carol's meddling triumphs in the end. May has two friends in Boca who also become involved in romantic entanglements: Lila Katz, who has been deprived in her earlier life and now seeks a well-off husband, and Flo Kliman, an intellectual former librarian who sees herself as being above all this romantic nonsense -- but still can't quite avoid it. Cohen paints a vivid picture of life in the South Florida retirement world, detailing the Boca lifestyle of shopping, movies, visiting grandchildren, club functions, and geriatric dating. While the novel is quite amusing, it is never disrespectful. Cohen encourages her readers to laugh with her characters, not at them.

Readers familiar with Pride and Prejudice will find an added level of enjoyment in noticing the parallels between the two books. But those who have never cracked the pages of an Austen novel won't be conscious that they are missing anything, as the book stands solidly on its own. There is even a kind of post-modernist twist in that Stan Jacobs, the most reluctant and misunderstood of the suitors, is a retired literature professor who offers the senior citizens a seminar on -- you guessed it -- Austen's Pride and Prejudice.

All in all this was an entertaining reading experience and a refreshing one, with all the heroines and heroes being over seventy. While Cohen's interest in 19th-Century literature shows in her homage to Austen, I couldn't help but think that her interest in film is reflected here as well. The short, quick chapters with cuts between subplots made me imagine a big-screen version of the novel, a kind of feature-length "Golden Girls" and yet another adaptation of Pride and Prejudice. -- reviewed by Alison Lewis