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Pride and Prejudice and Zombies

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By Pauline Beard

That noise you hear is either Jane Austen weeping in her grave, or chuckling at, or sharpening her Katana to wreak revenge on Seth Grahame-Smith for the outrage performed on her beloved Pride and Prejudice. Instead of a bright and sparkling heroine, Smith presents a Lizzy Bennet with sword-wielding, deer-wrestling powers and the ability to stomach (sometimes) beheading and dismembering the undead. I was at times revolted to the point of vomiting (an act which happens frequently in the new novel), roaring with guilty laughter, or sitting back saying aloud to Grahame-Smith “Boy, you’ve got balls!” (Plenty of those too in this revamping …pun intended). If this Amazon Book List recent favorite brings more readers back to the original novel I am thrilled; let’s face it is Austen’s novel simply with the odd line and action added about the undead, fighting the undead, recognizing someone with the strange plague decimating England, and back-stories woven in that sometimes delight but more often disgust.

The book is 85% Jane and 15% Seth (Sikka) in the “mash up” style of novels sweeping the best
seller lists. It took me a little while to understand the method: literally the use of the entire Austen text and then the “mash up” of the zombie text. Famous lines have tacked-on pieces: Mr. Darcy on dancing: “Every savage can dance. Why, I imagine even zombies could do it with some measure of success” (22 italics mine). Famous scenes of wit and conversation have action added in. For example the much filmed ball scene where Darcy is unpardonably rude to Elizabeth continues for pages of the original text and then Elizabeth’s “hand met the dagger beneath her dress. She meant to follow this proud Mr. Darcy outside and open his throat” (14). No doubt the original Lizzy had similar thoughts and a number of Janeites (fans of Austen and members of the Jane Austen Society of North America…JASNA) might have had the same desire—this text expresses them. Seth simply brings out hidden meanings and the infamous Austen humour. Who has not wished that Mr. Collins be stabbed “about the head and neck” (52) for insults to the Bennet girls, and joined in Mr. Bennet’s wish that his wife’s lips be sewn shut (88)?

Grahame-Smith explains his methods in an interview with Lev Grossman who sees a certain kind of logic in the original novel meshing with the zombie genre. Grossman claims that so much is unmentionable in Austen —"wit and good manners...cover up nasty things like sex and money"...so he questions, “Why not have those unmentionables be zombies?” (Time). Thus Elizabeth on her long walk to Netherfield vanquishes three unmentionables, beheading the last long-dead, “letting her battle cry be known for a mile in every direction” (28). On a symbolic level one could then claim that once Elizabeth reaches the manor house Netherfield, and confronts the snobbish Bingley sisters, the glutton Mr. Hurst, the affable weak Mr. Bingley and the proud Mr. Darcy, she is in fact battling her own “unmentionables”: class distinction, money superiority and stupidity versus wit, intellect and the culture of reading. Once I got the hang of the method, I had to follow up with some reading on zombie lore and literature, not a genre this Janeite is familiar with at all. I learned that the word zombie came from a type of voodoo snake god...from the Niger Congo...the Kongo word nzambi meaning god. Stories emerged from Haiti about the undead who rose from their graves in various stages of decomposition and hungered for the flesh of live human beings to bring them back to life. In some cases the human flesh was augmented by human brains. A bite or scratch from the zombie could bring about a stage of undeadness, a horrifying plague which causes the living to become undead in putrefying fashion, or was simply a condition acquired after death. For the literature, William Seabrook in 1929 wrote The Magic Island showing the zombie cult which came to “symbolize all our deepest fears, which have now been labeled as communism, capitalism, boundaries of medical science” (www.lsu.edu.faculty). Luminaries such as C.S.Lewis wrote Perelandia with a zombie, Professor Weston, representing the serpent in the Garden of Eden; J.K. Rowling in Harry Potter and The Half Blood Prince uses the inferius as a zombie, a corpse under the control of a dark wizard (www.experience/festival.com). George Romero’s 1968 film Night of the Living Dead, scorned at its inception is now a modern classic. Contemporary films show apocalyptic scenarios where the undead must be dismembered or burned to kill them off finally, because body parts continue to move. Zombie enlightened I saw the cleverness and hilarity beneath the outright rip-off of a classic. Two examples of back-stories will illustrate.

Lovers of the original novel have always wondered why on earth Charlotte Lucas would marry
the deadly Mr. Collins. Seth now provides the reason. Charlotte is in fact “stricken by the plague! Condemned to serve Satan!” On her walk to Longbourne, she was caught in the grasp of an unmentionable whose teeth “broke her skin. She was able to free herself...but Hell’s dark business had been carried out”. All Charlotte wants now is a few last happy months, and “a husband who will see to [her] proper Christian beheading and burial” (99). The juxtaposition of Christian and beheading is sobering as is Charlotte’s gradual deterioration into a zombie-like state. What saddened me even more was that nobody except Elizabeth sees or hears (Charlotte’s mouth is being destroyed by the “plague”) her friend’s decaying body. Charlotte gnaws on her hand (142); sores burst on her face and she relishes the pus running into her mouth (121); she squats as if to defecate before Elizabeth can rush her out of Lady Catherine’s card room (128)...yet her father thinks her “most comfortably settled” (129), married and living with Mr. Collins. The underlying meaning perhaps is derived from my reading other Austen novels where young women, sometimes plain, often virtually dowerless also go unnoticed (Anne Elliot); their feelings discounted (Fanny Price), their worth only as companions to more wealthy women (Jane Fairfax). Submissive, resigned to their lot, such women of that century probably decayed mentally and spiritually, unobserved, neither seen nor heard.

One could become maudlin in such analysis, but Grahame-Smith exercises the same type of Austen humour but in an inimitable ghoulish way when Charlotte observes Elizabeth and Darcy together. Instead of thinking about a love match for her friend, Charlotte often thinks of the “warm, succulent sensation of biting into a fresh brain...” Darcy’s. Thinking of his mind she salivates over his “salty, cauliflower-like brain”. She very much prefers Colonel Fitzwilliam as a match for Elizabeth but “Mr. Darcy had a considerably larger head, and thus, more brains to feast upon” (142). I cannot help but chuckle in an Austen-like way, and swear off cauliflower for life.

The descriptions can go over the top and I felt myself drawing back and away from the more puke-evoking. Perhaps Seth is anticipating this visceral reaction as he shows so many people in the novel actually vomiting: Elizabeth, Mr. Bingley, coach men, and Mrs. Bennet of course when she is so sick with her nerves after Lydia’s disgrace. However, I have to say the “punishment” in the back-story for Mr. Wickham gave me a rather sick pleasure. Somewhat like Jane Eyre’s Mr. Rochester ending up blinded and maimed, Wickham suffers a carriage accident which leaves him “bedridden and unable to move his limbs or control his personal business” (242). We know from the original novel that Wickham could not control his “personal business” leaving huge debts in Meryton, and attempting to seduce Darcy’s sister Georgiana...but here the punishment of one who leaves debts and bastard children where ever he goes, involves diapers and soiled linens....I actually feel sorry for Lydia in this novel when Mrs. Bennet’s famous acclaim of Lydia’s marriage has subtle additions: “Dear crippled Wickham! What a husband he shall make!” (indeed), and she orders for the newly weds “calico, muslin and silver bedpans” (246). Who has not wished for Wickham receiving more than simply Darcy’s bail-out and Mr. Bennet’s coldness? But poor foolish Lydia? The hardest of hearts might be moved by the new addition to Lydia’s end begging letter to Elizabeth: “…my Dear, lame Wickham... would like a parsonage” on finishing seminary...(!) “Any parsonage would do, of about three or four hundred a year...I must be off, as
my beloved has soiled himself anew” (315).

Tongue in cheek to the end, Seth then presents a reader’s Discussion Guide to his and Jane’s novel. I particularly enjoyed Number 10:

_Some scholars believe that the zombies were a last-minute addition to the novel, requested by the publisher in a shameless attempt to boost sales. Others argue that the hordes of living dead are integral to Jane Austen’s plot and social commentary. What do you think? Can you imagine what this novel might be like without the violent zombie mayhem? (319)_

Shameless, yes, and the answer to the last is easy: Yes I can, we already have that novel! But to the argument of being integral to the plot…in the spirit of Book Club discussions, I would like to offer some ideas. Jane Austen is frequently criticized for rarely mentioning topical events like the wars in France. We know simply by the regiment being quartered in Meryton then moved to Brighton that troops are needed and being mustered. With a little history background, readers recognize the threat from the French. Seth takes this concept further than Jane’s attempt, showing the threat from within. References to England and her “present unhappiness” (162) resonate throughout the novel. In London there is trouble on the East wall (256), some commotion on the street and the fear that the east gate has fallen again (262). In Sheffield a victory has taken place (141). The Gardiners must shorten their visit to the Lake District because of "recent troubles in Birmingham" and the need for Mr. Gardiner’s firm to provide “more flints and powder” (190). The Bennets have taken “a blood oath to defend the Crown above all things” (185); Elizabeth explains that the Bennet girls are “each commanded by His Majesty to defend Hertfordshire from all enemies until such time we are dead, rendered lame, or married” (226). With that lovely last bathos suggesting marriage is as bad as being dead or lame, the new novelist pokes fun at the social changes taking place in Austen’s novels that Austen herself only touches upon. Presumably fighting against the unliving unmentionables that are infecting the cities, the living are fighting the crucial symbolic changes taking place in the eighteenth century: the social order being overturned; the growth of the middle trade class; women on the stage; more women becoming literate and reading novels, of all things…. Seth takes the subtle references within Jane’s novels and they become writ large.

Or…the modern writer is just having fun with those subtleties. Whereas Jane’s Elizabeth has rarely been out of her village, and fights with her wit and tongue, Seth’s has travelled in China and learned the martial arts that she uses to brutal advantage. Instead of practicing the gentle art of piano playing at Rosings in the out of-the-way housekeeper’s area Lady De Bourgh recommends, Elizabeth practises her skills on Lady De Bourgh’s ninjas, killing one in an especially nasty way with her sword across his belly: “The ninja dropped to the floor—his innards spilling from the slit faster than he could stuff them back in. Elizabeth sheathed her sword, knelt behind him, and strangled him with his own large bowel” (130). Take that Lady De Bourgh! Class distinctions and downright rude snobbery are conquered by force not words and musical finesse. After Darcy’s infamous first proposal, Elizabeth fights back not only with words (“words for words” from Austen) to defend her family’s honor but also with her battle skills in order to kill Darcy. She
strikes the basic crane pose, attacks with “a series of kicks, forcing [Darcy] to counter with the
drunken washwoman defense” (151). The entire magnificently written original is punctuated with
martial arts poses and grabbing of the poker at crucial moments (152). The culmination of the
scene which all Austen lovers still thrill to goes to the extreme with Elizabeth’s put down of
Darcy: “You are mistaken Mr. Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected
me in any other way, than as it spared the slightest grief which I might have felt in beheading
you, had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner” (153). These words haunt Darcy of
course, and later when Elizabeth realizes her mistake about the man’s actions to Wickham, she
recalls her master Pei Liu of Shaolin who not only coaches her in martial arts but also the moral
codes of existence. Ashamed of herself, she wishes for her dagger so she can carry out the
seven cuts of dishonor. She wishes her master were there to “bloody [her] back with wet
bamboo” (165).

Finally, sex. How may one discuss Jane Austen without it? Readers of her novels know the
sexual subtleties that lie beneath the proper-seeming behaviour of her characters. Again Seth
elaborates on original lines with innuendo but keeps the modesty of the Bennet girls intact.
Elizabeth blushes at the following exchange between Darcy and Miss Bingley:

‘I should like balls infinitely better,’ she replied if they were carried on in a different manner.’
(Austen 49)

‘You should like balls infinitely better,’ said Darcy ‘if you knew the first thing about them.’
(Grahame-Smith 45)

Miss Bingley does not “get it”. Elizabeth frequently does. In the second lovely dancing scene in
the original, Elizabeth, striving to get a conversation going with Darcy remarks, “Perhaps by and
by I may observe that private balls are much pleasanter than public ones”, to which Darcy says
nothing (Austen 77). In the Grahame-Smith novel, Darcy replies, “On the contrary I find that balls
are much more enjoyable when they cease to remain private” (73). Elizabeth blushes but does
not reveal her amusement…most unladylike to do so. One more example and enough: Mr.
Darcy puts his arms around Elizabeth (scandalous and certainly not in the original)!’ ‘What can he
mean to do?’ she thought”. But Darcy is simply retrieving his rifle. Elizabeth recalls she has his
ammunition in her pocket: “‘Your balls Mr. Darcy?’ He reached out and closed her hand around
them and offered, ‘They belong to you, Miss Bennet.’ Upon this their colour changed, and they
were forced to look away from one another, lest they laugh” (205).

I think this is my main advice to the Janeites approaching Seth’s novel with skepticism if not
downright antagonism. It must be laughed at. The hidden meanings, the symbolic level, the
sexual innuendos (much ado about men’s trousers clinging to “English parts”), all need to be
treated in the spirit of the whole. The zombie lit readers, I hope, will be drawn back or afresh to
the original novel which is worth the read as Seth Grahame-Smith admits: “Who am I to screw
with one of the most brilliantly plotted novels of all time?” (Time). Who indeed?
Works Cited

I am grateful to my work-study student Freshman Julissa Rosen who found a number of sites on zombies for me. Many of them gave similar background pieces. I cite the following specifics:


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ONE THOUGHT ON “PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES”

Editor

on May 1, 2009 at 3:15 PM said:

Poster Name: Molly sloan
Message: Who indeed? Well put. I will not be marching with the hordes to Amazon to click my way into this zombie land. I`d rather just read P&P again on its own! Thanks for the revealing review.