

BOOKS

Marry me, babe

From zombies to soft porn, 'Pride and Prejudice' has inspired thousands of spin-offs. Now Curtis Sittenfeld takes it to suburban America. By *Duncan White*

NO English novel has been re-imagined and retold more often than *Pride and Prejudice*. There is the Hollywood film, the Mormon film and the zombie film (and also the zombie book, the zombie comic, the zombie prequel and the zombie sequel). There's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, which transports elements of the novel to the modern day, and there's *Lost in Austen*, which transports a modern woman back into the world of the novel. There's *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* told entirely through video blogs. There's PD James's murder-mystery sequel – *Death Comes to Pemberley* – and Jo Baker's below-stairs retelling, *Longbourn*. Now Curtis Sittenfeld's *Eligible*, published this month, reimagines the novel in the American Midwest.

These, it transpires, are only the beginning. If you peer under the Regency rug, you will find an extraordinary world teeming with *Pride and Prejudice* variations. Despite the noblest ambition towards quantitative rigour, I stopped counting at around 200 when the scale of it became too dizzying. An example. Remember Mary Bennet? Probably not – she's the boring sister. I found 23 adaptations dedicated to telling her story. My guess is that there must be at least a thousand *Pride and Prejudice* rewrites out there in one form or another; it's highly probable a new one has been published while you were reading this paragraph.

Most of the subgenres can be divided between the chaste or the raunchy. The chaste books retell Austen's story in every imaginable variation; in the raunchy books, the characters copulate in every imaginable combination. The chaste ones have titles such as *Going Home to Pemberley* and tend towards a Catherine Cookson aesthetic; the raunchy ones favour titles such as *Conjugal Obligation*, and grade from soft-focus euphemism to

the clefts and members of *Pride and Prejudice: Hidden Lusts*. Lady Catherine de Bourgh would find it all "highly improper".

Why has *Pride and Prejudice* become this cultural urtext? Where did the microbial epidemic break out? Was it Colin Firth being thrown in a pond? Andrew Davies's 1995 BBC adaptation sexed the novel up a great deal, with a hot and bothered Darcy emerging from his dip in the lake at Pemberley in a clingy wet shirt. That series, which opened up the novel to saucier interpretation, remains iconic; to a generation of Janeites, it has become inextricably bound up with their love of the original, fuelled by the fervent homage of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, in which Firth was cast again, to play Bridget's haughty suitor Mark Darcy.

But that BBC series, influential as it was, represents only a recent flourishing of a venerable literary phenomenon. There is something about Austen's books, and about *Pride and Prejudice* in particular, that makes people feel an intimate connection to her, an intimacy they want to share with fellow fans, whether by hosting replica dinner parties or writing ebooks about Darcy being a vampire.

According to the Austen scholar Deirdre Lynch, the genesis of this "Janeite cult" can be traced back to 1870 and the publication of *A Memoir of Jane Austen* by JE Austen-Leigh, her nephew. This cosy biography, which made Aunt Jane seem warm and approachable, turned her into a literary celebrity. Previously, her books had been fashionable only in high society; although her work was championed by an elite coterie, including Sir Walter Scott, Austen died in 1817 with no idea of the impact her novels would have in posterity.

In the 1880s and 1890s, deluxe, then illustrated, then cheap editions were published in quick succession. By 1905, Henry James could complain that the "stiff breeze of the commercial" was



carrying Austen beyond her "intrinsic merit". To James and his like, she was being read by the wrong sort of people.

In 1913, we find what is apparently her first piece of fan fiction, Sybil G Brinton's *Old Friends and New Fancies*, a sequel that mixes characters from several of Austen's novels. Then, in 1923, RW Chapman's editions of five Austen novels appeared, probably the first scholarly editions of an English novelist ever published. The different factions within Austen's readership were staking out their ground: the scholars who championed

her canonical seriousness squared up against the enthusiasts who found in her fictional worlds a place to play. Even as serious a figure as EM Forster would pronounce himself "slightly imbecile" about Austen. "To be one with Jane Austen!" he wrote. "It is a contradiction in terms, yet every Jane Austenite has made the attempt."

The immersive impulse that Forster felt is the same one that drives people to write today's fan fiction, whether *Return to Longbourn* or *Spank Me, Mr Darcy*. There is something intrinsic to Austen's novels that invites her readers to feel such intimacy with her world, and to want to create their own versions of it.

There are two ways, I think, that this works in *Pride and Prejudice*. On the one hand, the novel evokes a fantasy world for the modern reader, both period-specific and somehow, paradoxically, timeless. It

takes place on estates insulated from the turbulence of history; the action, such as it is, amounts to the characters making involved decisions about how to while away their leisure. It's like a literary spa holiday.

On the surface, this is sheer escapism; but, oddly, this is a fantasy world in which we are rooting for an underdog. Lizzie Bennet and her sisters are not secure in their world, threatened with the loss of Longbourn when their father dies. Lizzie might be on the gentry ladder, but she is near the bottom rung, far below the snobbish likes of Miss Bingley and Lady Catherine. In short, she is an outsider in Darcy's world, and much more sympathetic to the reader than if she were a duchess worth £10,000 a year.

It is ironic, then, that the second way Austen hooks readers is by making us snobs. Not bad snobs, obviously, but good snobs: connoisseurs of hypocrisy and vulgarity. The best example of this occurs when the ludicrous Mr Collins invites himself to Longbourn, to examine the estate he is to inherit from his cousin,

Mr Bennet, and to try it on with a few of that good man's daughters.

Lizzie finds the letter in which Collins proposes his visit "pompous in style". "Could he be a sensible man?" she asks her father. "No, my dear, I think not," he replies. "I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse. There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well. I am impatient to see him."

Collins lives up to his promise: Mr Bennet finds him "as absurd as he had hoped". His enjoyment of the man's vulgarity is hidden behind a "resolute composure of countenance", interrupted only by an "occasional glance at Elizabeth". These two are not alone in their complicit, covert pleasure: Austen and her reader are in on it, too. At such moments, the reader of Austen's novels feels, as Katherine Mansfield observed in 1920, the "secret friend of their author".

That friendship is not much of a secret anymore. The remarkable fecundity of Janeite fan fiction is tempting publishers to bring it to the cultural mainstream. A few years ago, HarperCollins launched the Austen Project, which set established writers the challenge of reworking the novels for the modern day: Joanna Trollope did *Sense and Sensibility*, Val McDermid *Northanger Abbey*, and Alexander McCall Smith *Emma*. Now Sittenfeld, author of the coming-of-age novel *Prep* (2005) and a fictional First Lady's memoir, *American Wife* (2009), has taken on *Pride and Prejudice*.

Eligible is set in the country club suburbs of Cincinnati, Sittenfeld's hometown, and the five Bennet

Spin-offs include *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Spank Me, Mr Darcy*

Peer under the Regency rug: Colin Firth as Mr Darcy and Jennifer Ehle as Lizzie Bennet in the 1995 BBC adaptation; below, a still from *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies*

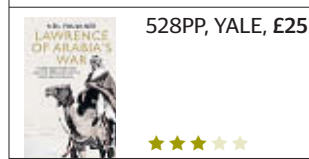
Curtis Sittenfeld's *Eligible* is published by The Borough Press (£14.99). To order a copy from the Telegraph for £12.99 plus £1.99 p&p, call 0844 871 1515

What became of Lawrence's Arabia?

Isil has turned T E Lawrence's dream of an Arab nation into a nightmare, says *Sameer Rahim*

LAWRENCE OF ARABIA'S WAR

by Neil Faulkner



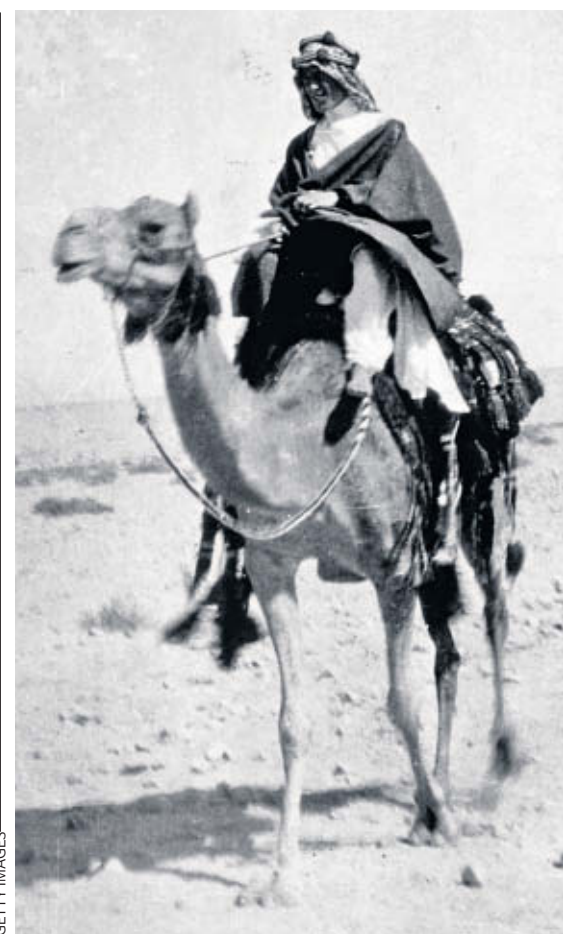
★★★★★

The Blue Castle in eastern Jordan is usually buzzing with tourists keen to see the rooms from which T E Lawrence directed the Arab Revolt. But when we went last summer, apart from a forlorn tour guide, it was deserted. Jordan is perfectly safe, but the war in nearby Syria and the rise of Isil have put off most westerners.

What would Lawrence have made of the mess the Middle East is in? And might he have felt some responsibility? Like nearly everything about this man, it is hard to say. Neil Faulkner, whose informative book examines the contest between the British-backed Arabs and the German-backed Ottomans during the First World War, has no doubt that the post-war carve-up of Arabia by the imperial powers led to "sectarianism, violence, intractable conflict and untold human suffering". Faulkner's judgment may be sweeping, but he is right to see the origins of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria in a period that saw the end of the Ottoman Empire, and the rise of Arab nationalism.

Since the 2003 Iraq war, when Britain helped to break the country it once designed, there has been renewed interest in Middle Eastern history. Lawrence, though, has rarely been out of fashion. His memoir, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1922), cast him as a disappointed romantic; in the David Lean film of 1962, he was a sensitive warrior, betrayed by the British and brutalised by the Turks; lately, academics have accused him of being a fantasist, overplaying his attacks on the Ottoman railways. Now, in Faulkner's Left-leaning study, Lawrence has become a "metaphor for the imperialism, violence and betrayals that tore the region apart a century ago and has left it divided into warring fragments ever since".

It is striking that this war, fought between Arabs and Turks, is still seen from the viewpoint of this Englishman. That is partly a matter of sources. The Arabs didn't write much down and the Turks restrict the access of western historians



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to their archives (worried, Faulkner speculates, what might be revealed about the Armenian massacres). The other reason Lawrence's narrative dominates is because he was an accurate as well as evocative writer. Faulkner found that, "wherever it could be tested", Lawrence's account was confirmed, "implying that the detractors who have portrayed him as a liar, a charlatan and a self-promoter are wrong".

Lawrence played the warrior-sheikh but never forgot his loyalty to Britain

Born out of wedlock in 1888 to an aristocrat and a governess, Lawrence was working in Syria as an archaeologist when war broke out. The Germans, as well as allying themselves with the Ottomans, sought to exploit Pan-Islamic feeling to unsettle the British Empire. The British also played on Muslim sentiments. In 1915, Sir Henry McMahon, high commissioner of Egypt, wrote to the Emir of Mecca Sharif Hussein

Master tactician: Colonel T E Lawrence in 1916



To order this book from the Telegraph for £20, call 0844 871 1515

of his "readiness to approve an Arab caliphate" once the Ottomans had been kicked out.

The British would never have countenanced a greater Arabia, let alone a revived caliphate. But it's an open question whether the ordinary Arab wanted such a state anyway. As Faulkner reminds us, the Arabs hadn't lived under a unified state for more than 1,000 years, and were used to being dominated by greater powers; most had their first allegiance to their tribe.

Lawrence looked on the Arabs as a noble race embodying medieval martial virtues. His admiration for Faisal, the man later crowned King of Syria and then Iraq, was typically dramatic. Faisal was "almost regal in appearance," he wrote, "like a European, and very like the monument of Richard I." But Lawrence later became disillusioned with Faisal – regarding him as weak-minded and indecisive – and the Arabs more generally. Faulkner is probably overstating it when he says that Arab nationalism was purely a British invention, but the dynamics at play were hardly clear-cut.

That is why all the talk of a "great betrayal" of the Arab cause by the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement is overblown. Lawrence played the warrior-sheikh but never forgot that his ultimate loyalty was to the British Empire. Faisal also knew the price he had to pay for throwing out the Turks and becoming king. He used Lawrence as much as Lawrence used him.

Where the Englishman excelled was in military tactics – well described by Faulkner. He had an instinctive grasp of what the author calls the "anthropology of war", marshalling the talents of men from different cultures. Historically, the Arabs had been successful in swift camel attacks. Lawrence saw they could do the same to the Turks. He led attacks on the 800-mile railway track from Damascus to Medina, forcing the enemy to waste resources in constant repairs. He developed the hit-and-run tactics that would be taken up later by anti-colonial guerrilla fighters – not least by Iraqis fighting the US and British after 2003.

But as Faulkner reminds us, the war wasn't all camel raids: in Palestine, General Allenby fought a brutal mechanised war. The Vickers Mark I, an early tank, reached a maximum speed of two miles an hour, the men inside contending with temperatures up to 50C. The brutality of hand-to-hand killing nearly sent Lawrence insane. After the war, he relived his experiences in theatrical shows, then died in a motorcycle accident in 1935.

Arab nationalism of the kind Lawrence favoured has now been replaced at its extreme with what the British airily promised during the First World War: a revived caliphate. In 2014, Isil posted footage online of the Sykes-Picot line between Iraq and Syria being blown up. Lawrence thought the Arab revolt had failed; in fact it was only just beginning.