

Harriet: A Jane Austen Variation

Alice McVeigh

Warleigh Hall Press (Feb 3, 2022)

Softcover (318pp)

978-1-916882-33-1

Valiant and feminist, Harriet is a fantastic tribute to Jane Austen's Emma.

Inspired by the works of Jane Austen, Alice McVeigh's *Harriet* is a lovely comedy of manners about friendship and love, both feigned and true.

The book reinvigorates the characters from Jane Austen's *Emma* and tells that story through the eyes of a poor friend of Emma's with unknown parentage, Harriet Smith, and the talented musician of whom Emma is jealous, Jane Fairfax. The three young women hope to find husbands, whether they are equal in station or not. Harriet can't hope for someone too wealthy or esteemed, as she is an illegitimate child and has no dowry. She and Emma confide in each other about their prospective partners—including protective yet austere Mr. Knightley and Mr. Martin, a farmer—and the gossip around town.

Here, Harriet submits to Emma's whims because she finds the deluded wealthy girl's perspective humorous, though she also relies on her for social standing. Meanwhile, Jane and orphaned Frank Churchill fall in love in secret, hiding their engagement with the knowledge that Frank's wealthy guardians will not approve of their marriage, as Jane, also an orphan, might soon become a governess or need to perform music for money. As the drama unfolds, truths emerge, and the characters grow within the confines of Regency society. A twist ending reveals Harriet's real parentage; it introduces compelling, layered reasoning for the characters' behavior, playing on the source text.

The chapters alternate between Harriet and Jane's perspectives well, revealing that Harriet is much more clever than she lets on: though she pretends to hang on to Emma's every word, she notices things that others do not—and dislikes Emma in secret. Jane is sweet, humble, and reserved, acknowledging her station while not letting it determine her future. Both young women, while living within the conservative restrictions of social expectations, are the feminist heroes of the tale, putting their own well-being first and using their often prohibitive environs to their benefits. As they and others pretend to be interested in people they don't like, and pretend not to be interested in people they do like for the purposes of stifling rumors or waiting until there is an environment of approval for their true desires, the text ably exposes and hides their motivations, resulting in drama that escalates in palpable ways.

The prose mimics that of Jane Austen, with Regency-era language and stylistic turns; the settings and context are well-realized, too. The end result is an immersive, high stakes, and heartfelt take on the classic.

Harriet is a fantastic tribute to Jane Austen's *Emma*—a historical novel whose rounded characters encounter circumstances in which they can let their valiant feminism shine.

AIMEE JODOIN (February 1, 2022)

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