"The mere habit of learning to love is the thing": Janeitism and/in Karen Joy Fowler's *The Jane Austen Book Club*

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Abstract
To the present day, Jane Austen has remained a subject of almost religious adoration for her numerous fans, the Janeites, who keep returning to her writings, take interest in the films and the popular works derived from them, and even seek to surround themselves with objects that remind them of their 'beloved'. Determined by the desire to engage in social practices that emulate Austenian sociability (O'Farrell 2009: 478-80), many of Jane Austen's "everyday enthusiasts" (Wells 2011: 11) have joined reading groups/ book clubs in order to discuss her fiction and to better understand its meanings. The flourishing of book clubbing and the reflection on the symbolic values attached to Jane Austen as an icon in the contemporary popular culture are foregrounded in Karen Joy Fowler's The Jane Austen Book Club *(2004), a postmodernist novel which focuses on several issues in today's American society such as gender relations, private lives, public social interactions/rituals and cultural practices or rivalry between the arts, yet all seen in relation to the reception of Austen's novels by "everyday" American readers. The paper proposes an analysis of this novel, considered illustrative for both postmodernist writing practices and the development of "Austen cult and cultures" (Johnson 1997) at the turn of the new millennium.*

Key words: *Jane Austen, popular culture, postmodernism, intertextuality, reading practices/reader response*

Introduction

Rivalling Shakespeare in terms of popularity with contemporary audiences, Jane Austen ranks among the best known and cherished names in English

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literature. The Shakespeare myth, sustained by myriad forms of interpretation, adaptation and appropriation of the Bard's work, seems to be still essentially symbolic of a highbrow tradition of sophistication, prominence in the theatre and academic study requiring specialist expertise, despite the numerous attempts at overcoming the high/low culture divide through its integration in artistic products representative of and/or appealing to popular culture. Austen, though, as a literary and cultural icon emerging from an equally wide range of forms of reshaping her fictional worlds, is much better anchored in contemporary popular culture, being often perceived as "common cultural property rather than the domain of specialists" (Lanier qtd. in Wells 2011: 20). On the one hand "the favourite author of literary men" (unsigned review, 1870 qtd. in Fowler 2005: 263) and of academics – starting with R. W. Chapman (1923) and F. R. Leavis (1948)[1] – Jane Austen has, on the other hand, gradually made her way to mass audiences' hearts through intense commodification and commercialization to the point of becoming, to use Henry James's famous, yet derogatory, phrase, "dear, our dear, everybody's dear, Jane" (1905 qtd. in Southam 1987: 230), as both her novels and her persona "have acquired a cult status" (Simons 2009: 471).

Considering Austen's reception in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, Judy Simons remarks that:

> Never best sellers in their author's lifetime, today Austen's six novels have consistently high sales and are available across the world in paperback and hard cover editions from dozens of publishing houses. Her books have proved sufficiently elastic to suit the full range of modern media. (Simons 2009: 471)

Particularly as a result of the boost given to the Austen cult by the 1995-1996 film adaptations of Austen's most famous novels (*Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*), the popularity of the English novelist's literary heritage has increased among "everyday enthusiasts" (Wells 2011: 11), i.e. non-academic readers who devotedly return to her writings and take interest in the films and the popular works derived from them. What some critics label as today's "Austenmania" (Pucci and Thompson 2003: 1) is often connected to the "numerous re-presentations in the forms of novels, movies, television series, and fan fictions that keep flourishing from her fictional worlds and characters" (Svensson 2013: 203), recasting and

reconfiguring Austen in "multimodal" forms of experience (Svensson 2013: 204). As Susanne R. Pucci and James Thompson explain,

> The Austen phenomenon is located within the interstices of the oral, visual, and spatial delivery systems, systems that reinforce each other and in turn reinforce the interaction among these media. Increasingly, this is the way cultural experiences are disseminated and consumed: see the film, read the book, buy the soundtrack, check out the Web site, visit the 'actual' Austen sites in English country houses and countryside... (2003: 5)

Thus, Austen herself, as a cultural icon, has become "multi-faceted", liable to be marketed, in her turn, as "a commodity, an industry, a corporation, and a celebrity" (Dryden 2013: 103). The ever-growing community of Janeites – mostly women nowadays – from all corners of the globe is able to experience Austen through more traditional forms related to the book-printing, film and television industries, but also through the "new and developing modes of literacy and sociability" (Mirmohamadi 2014: 3) provided by the internet, be it in the forms of online platforms for literary and fannish production, blogs and message boards, or the YouTube channel (see also O'Farrell 2009). Oscillating between "attraction to social formation and removal from it to private readership" (O'Farrell 2009: 480), the individuals constituting present-day "Austenian subcultures" engage differently, in a more or less participatory manner, with Austen's work and biography, as well as with Austen-related cultural products, causing, hence, the "Austen phenomenon" to evolve in multiple directions.

Numerous professional writers, themselves Austen lovers, have contributed to and/or reflected on contemporary modes of reinforcing and sustaining the "Austen brand" (Foster 2008). Some have chosen to customize Austen's life and work to the expectations of the new generations of Janeites, seeking to make connections and to close their "gaps" in new texts that rely on a wide range of techniques from parody, pastiche, burlesque, shifts in narrative perspective, recontextualization, timeline expansion, to adaptation to popular genres like crime/mystery, fantasy/horror, erotica or Christian romance[2]. Equally capitalizing on Austen's popularity, others have engaged in more complex intertextual games with Austen's writings that would simultaneously allow them to pay tribute to "dear Jane" and to explore various aspects of life in the contemporary society, the "Austen phenomenon" included. Next to Helen

Fielding, the famous English author of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), the American novelist Karen Joy Fowler, with her *Jane Austen Book Club* (2004), is a relevant example for this latter category.

From the very title, Karen Joy Fowler's novel *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2004) announces itself as a symptom of the wide spreading of the "Jane Austen syndrome" (Garber 2003) in the turn-of-the-millennium American society and a representation of patterns of behaviour that characterise at least some of today's Janeites – who oscillate between "the fantasy of authorial possession" in the act of reading (O'Farrell 2009: 478), the desire of "becom[ing] the secret friend[s]" of Jane Austen (Mansfield 1920 qtd. in O'Farrell 2009: 478), and the urge to seek opportunities to interact with other Austen lovers and, thus, to interiorize and to put into practice the Austenian 'lesson' on "sociability as an exercise in management of time, life and world" (O'Farrell 2009: 480). This comes as natural from a writer who openly declares her love for Austen ("I've always loved Austen. I read her books over and over again." – Fowler, May 2004) and her adherence (even if temporarily) to the book clubbing 'subculture':

> What I like about book clubs is how often they demonstrate the incredible controlling power the reader has, in the end, over the reading experience and the text. In the way book clubs usually operate, you've all read the same book and you've come to talk about it, but of course as you talk about it, you've not read the same book at all: you've sometimes read utterly different books. I've been in a club with a fairly steady group for about five years, and I still cannot predict who's going to like what, or why. Obviously we bring our life stories to it, but I think we also must bring our *last-week* histories to it, so you pick up a book in a good mood or a bad mood. It has an enormous impact. (Fowler, December 2004)

Such statements actually suggest the need for a more thorough consideration of *The Jane Austen Book Club*. This paper endeavours to prove that it is not just another Janeite's attempt at paying homage to her 'idol' and at producing a text that engages in a more or less sophisticated dialogue with her work. Hidden under the 'clothes' of what, at first sight, appears to be mere chick lit, there is a postmodernist novel that seriously considers current ways of engaging with and responding to literary texts (in this case, Jane Austen's) as well as the social practices they engender,

while also reflecting on issues of concern for the contemporary American society.

At the crossroads: between highbrow and lowbrow

That Karen Joy Fowler's intention is to blur, as expected from a postmodernist novel, "the boundaries between popular and high art, between mass and elite culture" (Hutcheon 2006: 116) is indicated by both elements of the novel and the paratexts that frame it. Set in Sacramento Valley, California, the plot of the novel focuses on a group of six characters, five women (Jocelyn and Sylvia, both in their early fifties; the thirty year old Allegra, Sylvia's daughter; the sixty-seven year old Bernadette and the twenty-eight year old Prudie) and a man (Grigg, in his early forties). They have different backgrounds: Jocelyn is a dog breeder; Sylvia works as a librarian; Allegra is glamorous, gay, fond of extreme sports and keeps, for a while, the company of a young would-be writer, Corinne; Bernadette had been trained for a career in the entertainment business but chose that of a wife and married several times; Prudie teaches French at a high school; and Grigg has "a temp job at the university, part of the secretarial pool" and is "based in the linguistic department" (Fowler 2005: 137). For all these characters, the participation in the book club, initially organised by Jocelyn in her attempt to help her life-time friend Sylvia get over the difficult moment of her divorce from Daniel, "her husband of thirty-two years" (2), also becomes an opportunity to bridge or simply ignore the differences between informed (e.g. Grigg's) and rather naive (e.g. Jocelyn's) ways of understanding literature, in particular Austen's novels. Interestingly and somewhat ironically, the paradoxical mixing of highbrow/lowbrow approaches to Jane Austen that pertain to the readers inside and outside the academic circles is most obvious in the construction of Prudie as the 'true Janeite' in Fowler's novel. Prudie's academic training determines her to peruse the novels she reads and to fill numerous index cards "in order to remember it all" (83), yet she refers to Jane Austen using only her first name, 'Jane', hence in a very unscholarly manner which is rather reminiscent of the popular culture reception of the English writer "as if she is a friend or even a family member" (Wells 2011: 3). Moreover, Prudie proves to lack the detachment required of a literary critic and, like the amateur Austen readers in the book club, embraces the idea that reading Austen's novels could function as a "therapeutic practice" (Wells 2011: 22),

helping her find solutions to her personal problems. Along the same lines, it is worth mentioning that Prudie is explicitly associated with the "ascribing [of] 'divinity' to 'Jane'" (Lynch 2005: 113) characteristic of Austen's representation in the popular culture[3], as it can be seen from the 'coda' to Chapter Three, which focuses on "read[ing] *Mansfield Park* with Prudie" (Fowler 2005: 81). In Prudie's dream, a God-like Jane Austen helps her regain peace of mind and overcome grief at her mother's death (which turns out particularly traumatising for Prudie, though she and her mother had had a difficult relationship):

> Without actually ascending a staircase, Prudie finds herself upstairs, alone, in a hall with many doors. She tries a few, but they're all locked. Between the doors are life-sized portraits interspersed with mirrors. The mirrors are arranged so that every portrait is reflected in a mirror across the hall. Prudie can stand in front of these mirrors and position herself so that she appears to be in each portrait along with the original subject.
>
> Jane arrives again. She is in a hurry now, hustling Prudie past many doors until they suddenly stop. "Here's where we've put your mother," she says. "I think you'll see we've made some improvements."
>
> Prudie hesitates. "Open the door," Jane tells her, and Prudie does. Instead of a room, there is a beach, a sailboat and an island in the distance, the ocean as far as Prudie can see. (115-116)

Also, the exchange of opinions on Jane Austen and her novels (*Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Persuasion*, in the order in which they are referred to in the six 'corresponding' chapters of Fowler's text) among the members of the book club both hints at the "validation of the amateur reading association" as social practice and raises "critical issues which concern Austen scholars: ownership, status, reception, genre, and the postmodern" (Simons 2009: 473).

Equally relevant of Fowler's endeavour to efface the distinction between high and popular culture, as well as academic and amateur readers of Austen, are some of the paratexts added to her novel. Her so-called 'Reader's Guide' is actually a quotation from Martin Amis's article "Jane's World", published in *The New Yorker* in January 1996:

> Jane Austen is weirdly capable of keeping everybody busy. The moralists, the Eros-and-Agape people, the Marxists, the Freudians, the Jungians, the

> semioticians, the deconstructors—all find an adventure playground in six samey novels about middle-class provincials. And for every generation of critics, and readers, her fiction effortlessly renews itself. (Amis qtd. in Fowler 2005: 251)

Thus, Fowler uses a voice of authority in the present-day world of highbrow novel and academic studies to reinforce the ultimate message of her novel, namely that Jane Austen is above high art/ popular culture divisions as her novels 'speak' to the readers, irrespective of the age and the (sub)culture they belong to.

The following paratexts – 'The Novels' (252-257) and 'The Response' (258-283) – seek to meet the expectations of both uninformed and scholarly readerships. The former provides the ordinary reader with accessible plot synopses of the six novels by Jane Austen with which Fowler's own work establishes intricate intertextual relations. The latter addresses the connoisseur in literary criticism and invites her/him to embark on a long, yet fascinating 'journey' along the 'convoluted paths' of Austen's reception, recording comments by Austen's family members and friends providing her with feedback on her novels (e.g. *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*), as well as by "critics, writers, and literary figures" considering "Austen, her novels, her admirers, and her detractors through two centuries" (260) (from 1812 to 2003).

Pastiching and departing from Austenian models

It is important to notice that the fragmented discourse of Fowler's novel, marked by repeated movements back and forth in time, and the breaking up of the text by the use of spaces, titles in different font, small drawings of chairs, the introduction of 'codas' to every chapter, several emails (exchanged between Grigg and his sisters) and even an advertising poster for an invented mystery novel (*A Murder of Crows* by Mo Bellington) (200), is largely held together by a cleverly-woven web of intertextual connections. Fowler introduces in her novel excerpts of various length from Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*, from negative comments on Austen's novels by the American writers Mark Twain and Ralph Waldo Emerson or from the 'treatises' of an eighteenth-century dancing master, Kellom Tomlison, in order to subtly hint at the deep meanings attached to the experiences that shape her characters' identities. More complex, though, are the links that establish between

Austen's and Fowler's fiction, beyond mere quotation. Fowler's exercise in "artistic recycling" of Austen's work (Rabinowitz 1980 qtd. in Hutcheon 1985: 15) may be labelled as pastiche: it "operates more by similarity and correspondence" (Hutcheon 1985: 38) with Austenian plots, characters and even writing style, and "remains within the same genre as its model[s]" (Hutcheon 1985: 38). Fowler – the Janeite entwines in her narrative discourse realism with romance, the keen observation of interactions within both the domestic and the public spaces with the representation of the inner world of the characters. As Judy Simons rightfully remarks,

> [Fowler's novel] reinforces both Austen's provincial appeal – the six who form the club are small-town inhabitants, and as two members are a mother and daughter, a replica of Austen's "three or four families in a country village" – and her transatlantic portability. The setting, in an American suburb with a distinctively twenty-first century outlook and culturally specific environment, indicates Austen's ability to transcend geographical distance and national boundaries. (2009: 473)

Even if writing for and about another age and cultural environment, Fowler largely follows the Austenian 'recipe': she constructs her novel around the making, breaking and re-making of couples, ultimately opting for a happy ending as the resolution of all narrative equations (see Tauchert 2005: 15). Nonetheless, she avoids falling into the trap of slavish and unproblematic imitation of her Austenian models.

Thus, Jocelyn, who is single at the beginning of the novel, resembles Austen's Emma, as she is always in search for the right match for her friends.

> While they were still in high school, she'd introduced Sylvia to the boy who would become her husband, and she'd been maid of honour at the wedding three years after they graduated. This early success had given her a taste for blood; she'd never recovered. (Fowler 2005: 3)

That accounts for her endeavouring to find "suitable young men" for Sylvia's daughter Allegra, "switch[ing] to suitable young women" when she found out that Allegra was gay, and, maybe (as Sylvia suspects), even for her inviting Grigg – whom she had accidentally met at a hotel in Stockton where she participated in "the annual meeting of the Inland

Empire Hound Club" and he attended "a science fiction convention" (126) – to join the book club[4]. Her very profession, running a kennel and breeding Rhodesian Ridgebacks, allows Jocelyn to give ample time to this 'hobby' of hers, i.e. match-making, and Fowler uses it as a source of metaphoric, somewhat ironic, hints at the profile of the ideal husband as envisaged by women in the postfeminist age, which is not very far from the one drawn in Austen's *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*: "The dog show emphasizes bloodline, appearance, and comportment, but money and breeding are never far from anyone's mind" (39). However, Jocelyn's interactions with Grigg throughout the six months (from April to August) covered by the novel's storyline indicate that she is equally conceived as a contemporary Elizabeth Bennet who must get over deceiving "first impressions", give up her pride and finally accept that the man with "nice eyelashes and a funny name" who, she initially thought, "didn't interest her in the slightest" (157), is actually her Mr Darcy.

In the aftermath of the crisis that leads to her separation from Daniel, favoured by miscommunication between the spouses and Daniel's feeling that, for him at least, marriage has stopped being a source of fulfilment and happiness, Sylvia is revealed as having much in common with Anne Eliot from Austen's novel *Persuasion*. She continues to love her ex-husband, though she is trying to come to terms with his being involved with another woman (Pam), and enjoys the thought that Daniel might believe her attached to another man (when, while at home, preparing a few things to take to the hospital, after Allegra's accident, Daniel overhears a message Grigg left Sylvia on the phone, inviting her to have lunch with him). Daniel too slips into the shoes of Captain Wentworth when he chooses, as a means of reconciliation with Sylvia, a letter in which he confesses that he still loves her and asks to be given a second chance. The two are ultimately reunited, so their story ends happily, just like that of their Austenian counterparts. But, as in the case of Jocelyn, there is much more to say about Sylvia's Austenian dimensions. Her relationship with Allegra, her daughter, who comes back home to support her after the divorce, discloses her similarity to another Austenian character, Elinor Dashwood. Sylvia is, hence, the embodiment of "sense", showing restraint, when it comes to expressing her feelings for her ex-husband Daniel, and being deeply devoted to Allegra (even more plausibly so, since, with

Fowler, Sylvia is a mother, not a sister figure) when the latter gets injured at a local climbing gym and is hospitalised.

That Allegra stands for "sensibility" among Fowler's characters is repeatedly implied in the novel. This gay Marianne Dashwood turns out to be, like her Austenian model, "everything but prudent", "sensible and clever, but eager in everything; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation" (Austen 2012: 5). That accounts for Allegra's enthusiasm with extreme sports like skydiving and climbing, ignoring the inherent risks, her loss of self-control when betrayed by her lover Corinne, her Willoughby (who takes advantage of Allegra's bedtime confessions to make up for lack of inspiration and to make a name as a short-story writer), as well as for her attempt at regaining her equilibrium at home, in Sylvia's company, until she can find love and happiness again (with Dr. Yep). Only in the Epilogue does Fowler depart from the Austenian formula and proposes a less 'happy' ending to Allegra's quest for the right match: she moves "back to San Francisco and back with Corinne" (Fowler 2005: 249), much to the dissatisfaction of her family and friends who find it "hard to have a good feeling about the relationship" (250).

Trapped between an authoritarian mother, who seems, above all, interested in preparing her daughter to become a star in Hollywood, and an indulgent father, a dentist who is "pushed and prodded and coaxed and sulked" by his wife until he gets his daughter "introduced to someone somewhere in that chain of someones" (166), Bernadette unavoidably reminds the reader of one of the Bennet girls in *Pride and Prejudice*. Her first marriage may strike one as quite similar to the Lydia Bennet – Wickham subplot line in Austen's novel[5]. Bernadette and John, her Wickham, ran off to Vegas to get married, without her parents' blessing, but John, a politician who "made the best first impression" (182), proved, in fact, to be a "climber" who cared only about his image in the eyes of the voting public, and lacked integrity and loyalty. The end of Bernadette's relationship with John seems to complicate even more the connection between Fowler's and Austen's characters: John ultimately ran off with Bernadette's little sister, without having divorced, and Bernadette's father "had to go looking all over the state for them to bring [her] sister home" (191). There may be more than one way of reading this final twist in the story of Fowler's characters. On the one hand, it may provide evidence of Fowler's intention of 'playing' with details from *Pride and Prejudice* shuffling them in pastiching Austen:

Bernadette is temporarily 'dressed' in Elizabeth Bennet's 'clothes', betrayed by Wickham, who chose to elope with her younger sister Lydia, while Bernadette's father is shown as Mr Bennet-like, desperate to find his silly daughter. On the other hand, though, taking into account a popular practice among Janeites, namely that of turning into writers producing new texts "to fill in the gaps – in both Austen's novels and her biography – according to their own desires" (Foster 2008), this may be indicative of Fowler's attempt at imagining a possible continuation of Lydia and Wickham's story, of course updated and transposed into another cultural frame, which would show the former allegedly learning a lesson and the latter unable to change his despicable character. The important thing is that Bernadette, this modern American Lydia, never loses faith in the power of love and, despite failures in her subsequent marriages, she still believes in happy endings (Fowler 2005: 243). She finds the inner resources necessary to start all over again with a new husband, Señor Obando, who finally seems to be closer to the Mr Darcy ideal (as mentioned in the Epilogue). Edward Neill interprets Bernadette's marriage with Señor Obando as "a kind of parody of Austen's repeated, yet differenced, marriage-plot outcomes in her six completed novels", but he seems to draw a somewhat similar conclusion in relation to Bernadette's choice of marrying again as "entailing a 'triumph of hope over experience'" (2004: 252).

As for Prudie, the youngest member of the Jane Austen book club, her image connects back to that of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*. Her personality is, like Fanny's, profoundly influenced by the difficult relationship with her mother and by social marginalization, here rendered in the form of high school experiences that Prudie did not "remember with satisfaction" (Fowler 2005: 87). Moreover, this Fanny Price 'reloaded' is equally caught in a love triangle: she goes through the 'test' of resisting the 'charms' of the dangerously flirtatious and amoral Trey Norton, one of her students, whom she observes in 'action' first with Sallie Wong (another student of hers) and then at the rehearsal of a school production of *Brigadoon*, where he dares approach her, before accepting that, after all, the steady, "dependable" Dean, her husband, is her Edmund and the best companion for her[6].

Last but not least, Grigg, the only male member of the book club, is not deprived of certain intertextual complexity. His past, especially a "poignant episode" (Simons 2009: 473) of his youth, when a camping trip

with his father ends up as "a 1970s Gothic nightmare set in a mansion, which has been taken over by drug-taking hippies" (Simons 2009: 473), points to his being partly envisaged as a male version of Catherine Morland. Nonetheless, his present, which reveals him eager to get Jocelyn's attention, after their first meeting in the elevator of a Stockton hotel, and to integrate into the Jane Austen book club, brings about his metamorphosis into a Mr Darcy in pursuit of the woman he loves. Even Grigg's profile seems broadly reminiscent of that of Austen's 'most wanted' bachelor: he is portrayed as attractive, physically and, though not financially, definitely intellectually[7]. He is not just a "science-fiction addict" (Simons 2009: 473), but an avid and open-minded reader whose list of readings includes a wide range of texts from the early gothic to postmodernism, and, after his joining the book club, Jane Austen. That is an opportunity for Fowler to further expand the dialogue with other texts in her novel by means of references to Ann Radcliffe and Ursula Le Guin, in particular, but also to Arthur C. Clarke, Theodore Sturgeon, Philip K. Dick, Andre Norton (aka Andrew North), Connie Willis, Nancy Kress or Patrick O'Brian.

All these characters that Fowler creates drawing on Austenian hypotexts have their share of troubles but also of happiness and the end of Fowler's novel is unmistakably tributary, like that of Austen's novels, to "the magical framework of romance" (Tauchert 2005: 7): Sylvia and Daniel get back together, Grigg and Jocelyn become a couple, Bernadette gets married again, Allegra is temporarily involved with Dr. Yep[8] but then returns to Corinne, and Prudie and Dean's relationship is probably improved.

Nevertheless, as already mentioned, in Fowler's novel, pastiche does not work simply by imitation of Austenian plot patterns but also by the more or less extended imitation of Austen's writing style. As with Austen, important building blocks for character construction at the discursive level are what Mieke Bal calls the "piling up of data" regarding the 'reality' that makes up the so-called "frame of reference", as well as the relations to other characters and to itself (2002: 119, 125). Thus, *The Jane Austen Book Club* 'piles up' details which prove the American writer's interest (akin to Austen's) in the recording of various aspects of life in the contemporary society. That gender differences, gender relations and the renegotiation of the individual's identity at the intersection of multiple perspectives on femininity and masculinity are very much of the heart of

the novel is demonstrated by the life stories of the six protagonists. Jocelyn must work through the trauma of being raped when she was still a teenager. After having been married for thirty-two years, Sylvia must cope with the painful experience of the divorce, which is all the more traumatizing for her as she was born in a Catholic family. The gay Allegra openly expresses her sexual orientation and is constantly in search for someone to love and be loved by. Bernadette likes "the getting married" but not "being married" and is still looking for the man who would make her feel she could "fit [her] whole self into a marriage" (Fowler 2005: 193). Concerned about gender stereotypes and how they influence the expectations of partners in a relationship, Prudie must discover what would make her content: sexual gratification in a potential affair with an available student or marriage with a responsible and loyal man like Dean. Largely influenced by his very close relationship with his three sisters (Amelia, Bianca and Cat), Grigg comes to be perceived even by his own parents as effeminate ("more of a girl than any of the girls" – 143), so his father has to "teach him to be a man" (143) and lamentably fails to do so. The picture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century American society, as painted in Fowler's novel, is then completed by further details. Some regard parent – child relationships, seen as close (in Sylvia and Allegra's case), difficult (in Bernadette's and Grigg's cases) or conflict-ridden (in Prudie's case). Religious differences are focused on in the references to Sylvia's Catholic family and the detailed representation of sect life as witnessed by Bernadette while living in Colorado in Reverend Watson's commune. Politics and the race for power are alluded to in the story of John, Bernadette's first husband. Multiculturalism is hinted at in the presentation of Sylvia Sanchez's family and childhood amidst a Spanish-speaking community in Chicago (most likely, a Mexican-American one, as suggested by the reference to Sylvia's father writing for the newspaper *La Raza* – 209).

Many 'bits' of these 'slices of life' in the contemporary American society are, though, incorporated in the large flashback sections of the novel that look almost like six "dramatic monologues" (Hinnant 2004: 20), which disorder the coherence of the main narrative. It is true that there are plenty of instances in Jane Austen's novels which confirm the appeal of introspection to the English writer (that finds its best expression at the discursive level in the use of free indirect discourse) and that there is a

sense of nostalgia in Austenian narratives. But, for Austen's characters, the past should be thought of as long as "its remembrance gives [one] pleasure", as Elizabeth Bennet puts it in *Pride and Prejudice* (2012: 389), so their nostalgia is "a form of forgetting – a winnowing of the specific, emotional disturbance, and unpredictability of reminiscence into a diluted, vague, comfortable retrospect" (Dames qtd. in Hinnant 2004: 20). At this point, Fowler departs from the Austenian model and, as if trying to provide new evidence of the fact that there are continuities with modernism in postmodernist writing (Hutcheon 2006: 118), her characters are haunted by their past. Hence, past events, as narrated through Fowler's six "centres of consciousness" (to use Henry James's terms), steal the attention of the reader and even tend to dominate the narrative discourse to the detriment of the storyline set in the present. That explains why some of the reviewers of *The Jane Austen Book Club* (e.g. Mullan 2004; Hinnant 2004) tend to downgrade the merits of Fowler's novel and reproach to it the fact that the book club, which is supposed to provide the main narrative thread of the novel, "remains a convenience for gathering the novel's capsule stories" (Mullan 2004).

Yet, such criticism seems utterly unfair and ignorant of the main function(s) of the series of discussions occasioned by the Jane Austen book club meetings in Fowler's novel: they show her interest in manifestations of the "Austen phenomenon" in contemporary America and give substance to the metafictional dimension of the novel.

Metafiction in practice

Fiction writing and the relationship between 'reality' and the literary text that is supposed to represent it entwine with gender issues and are in focus not only in the account of Allegra's bitter experience with Corinne, who 'copies' her partner's life stories in short stories that she sends for publication in hopes of gaining visibility as a writer, but also in the 'coda' to Chapter Five which encloses "promotional materials for a new Terrence Hopkins Mystery by Mo Bellington", *A Murder of Crows* (Fowler 2005: 200). Ironically, this mystery novel, which is advertised as maybe "Bellington's best ever" (200) draws, judging by its brief description, precisely on Bernadette's 'adventures' in Reverend Watson's commune, as recounted by Bernadette, at a gathering of the club members at "the annual fund-raiser

for the Sacramento Public Library" (158), in an attempt to counter the male writer's prejudiced opinion of "women's stuff" (182) (Jane Austen's novels included) as lacking "good plot" (182). The debate on the 'ingredients' of good fiction that involves Mo Bellington and Bernadette raises ontological questions "about what sort of world is being created at each moment in the text, and who or what in a text [the reader] can believe or rely on" (Malpas 2005: 24). If Bellington proclaims himself "kind of a stickler for accuracy" (Fowler 2005: 193) who values the "discovery phase" (193) as it gives him access to stories he might recycle in his own fiction, Bernadette "shade[s] a few things" in the construction of her plot, "add[ing] some bits. Sports. Lingerie. Sexy little sisters. Guy stuff."(193), to the point that it is difficult to tell (as Prudie realizes) "which parts were true and which weren't" (193). Reminiscent of the postmodernist mindset is also the idea, expressed in the same chapter, this time in a discussion between Sylvia and Allegra, that fictional characters could escape authorial control and have a "secret life" of their own:

> "Are you saying Austen meant [Charlotte Lucas] to be gay?" Sylvia asked. "Or that she's gay and Austen doesn't know it?"
>
> Sylvia preferred the latter. There was something appealing in thinking of a character with a secret life that her author knew nothing about. Slipping off while the author's back was turned, to find love in her own way. Showing up just in time to deliver the next bit of dialogue with an innocent face. If Sylvia were a character in a book, that's the kind of character she'd want to be. (171)

More often than not, though, the reflections on the text production – text reception continuum tend to veer onto the subject of Austen's readings and re-presentations in the postmodern American culture. As Mary Ann O'Farrell points out,

> Exploring their discreet Austens together, the participants in her Jane Austen book club, Fowler seems to suggest, make a society out of personal and private obsessions and demonstrate that society itself is so constituted. And thinking about the function of author-based communities for an Austenian readership that is attached to a sense of victorious and possessive oneness with Austen means recognizing a readership that, in the course of developing subcultures, embodies the tension and enacts the play between private obsession and public relations. (2009: 478-479)

The very structuring of the group of book club participants is meant to draw attention to and simultaneously undermine stereotypical perceptions of the contemporary Janeite. The predominance of women among the members of the book club in Fowler's novel signals her acknowledging the gender-marked profile of the target audience for Austen's novels and for the various forms (which include film adaptation) of expanding her universe as part of the "huge phenomenon" referred to as "Austenmania". Most present-day Austen fans are women whose "appreciation of [Austen's] novels stems in part from her depiction of women's life" (Wells 2011: 16), and more specifically from her representation of love relationships from the perspective of a feminine consciousness as always (though sometimes rather implausibly) ending happily with "ideal marriages that *somehow* resolve all real (social) contradictions for her heroines and their communities" (Tauchert 2005: 19). And when they seek to "explore, dissect, and reconfigure her life and fiction" in their own writings, women writers inspired by Austen (Fowler included) "do not 'talk back' to her so much as converse with her" (Wells 2011: 16); hence Fowler's use of pastiche rather than parody in her novel. That may also account, as some reviewers of the novel suggest, for Fowler's choice of a rather uncanny narrating voice that tells the story of the book club meetings. Dismissed by some as "bizarre" (Mullan 2004), Fowler's narratorial 'we' might help convey a certain sense of solidarity and sociability by metaleptically connecting the female writer (Fowler) and the female readers, the real-life Janeites, to the female characters of the novel, the fictional ones. Patricia O'Conner comments on this peculiarity of Fowler's style in the following terms:

> Most intriguing of all is the occasional narrator who steps in to describe the group's meetings in an unexpectedly cozy first-person plural: "We were quiet for a minute, listening to the fly buzz, thinking our private thoughts." But the speaker isn't any one of the six book club members. Then who is it? Some ghostly collective presence? Jane herself? Reader, is it ... us? (2004)

Interestingly, though, Fowler's book club also includes a man, Grigg, who has never read Austen's novels but is willing to do so in order to integrate in the group. It is not clear whether Grigg evolves into an 'Austen devotee', but he definitely has the profile of what the early twentieth-century society

would have called a Janeite: a "cultured" and "sensitive" man (Johnson 1997: 213), with certain knowledge of literary criticism, whose admiration for Austen's novels is motivated by the questions they raise and her writing style rather than by romance. It is equally true that Grigg is conceived as a male character that escapes the patriarchal stereotypes of masculinity and remains more 'in touch' with his feminine side. Even so, by creating this character, Fowler appears to have made a step forward towards reminding her readers that Jane Austen is "everybody's dear" (no irony or pejorative meaning intended)[9], irrespective of gender, age or education differences. Furthermore, for all Fowler's characters, as for all Austen's 'lovers' – "especially, but not exclusively, women" – reading Austen "[has] to do with growing up", finding answers not only to academic questions (like Grigg's or, sometimes, Prudie's) but mostly to personal ones; hence, it becomes a means "to find meaning and to understand themselves" (Wells 2011: 21).

But, as a novel about how Austen's novels are read nowadays, Fowler's *The Jane Austen Book Club* is, above all, meant to investigate reading practices in their multiplicity. In line with Barthes's theory according to which the "birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author", since "the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost" (2001: 1469-1470), Fowler believes that "[e]ach of us has a private Austen" (2005: 1)/"[e]veryone has a private Austen" (288). So she sets out to illustrate in her novel various perceptions of Jane Austen, as the members of her fictional book club "view Austen through the lenses of their own experiences, creating a kaleidoscope through the sum of their little bits of Austen" (Foster 2008).

Having chosen as a motto a quotation from Jane Austen's *Emma* that, *avant* postmodernism, implies that there is no single, absolute truth ("Seldom, very seldom does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken." – 2012: 874), Fowler lays out, from the very Prologue, different images of a commodified Austen in the contemporary popular culture.

> Jocelyn's Austen wrote wonderful novels about love and courtship, but never married. (Fowler 2005: 1)

> Bernadette's Austen was a comic genius. Her characters, her dialogue remained genuinely funny, not like Shakespeare's jokes, which amused you only because they were Shakespeare's and you owed him that. (1-2)
>
> Sylvia's Austen was a daughter, a sister, an aunt. Sylvia's Austen wrote her books in a busy sitting room, read them aloud to her family, yet remained an acute and non-partisan observer of people. Sylvia's Austen could love and be loved, but it didn't cloud her vision, blunt her judgment. (2)
>
> Allegra's Austen wrote about the impact of financial need on the intimate lives of women. If she'd worked in a bookstore, Allegra would have shelved Austen in the horror section. (4)
>
> Prudie's was the Austen whose books changed every time you read them, so that one year they were all romances and the next you suddenly noticed Austen's cool, ironic prose. Prudie's was the Austen who died, possibly of Hodgkin's disease, when she was only forty-one years old. (4)

Only Grigg's image of Austen remains initially unknown ("None of us knew who Grigg's Austen was." – 5), a welcome instance of mystery to arouse the reader's curiosity and an open door to the integration of a different approach to Austen, more akin to the academic's/literary critic's, in the broader 'picture' of Austen's reception at the turn of the millennium. For Grigg, at least, Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is particularly appealing because "it's all about reading novels. Who's the heroine, what's an adventure? Austen poses these questions very directly"; that is why, in Grigg's opinion, "there's something very pomo going on there" (138). Moreover, Grigg takes interest in the intertextual links that connect Austen's novel to Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* and their impact on the very construction of Austen's narrative discourse: "Austen's imitated the structure, made all her choices in opposition to that original text. Assumes everyone has read it" (139). That definitely distinguishes Grigg from his interlocutors and fellow readers in the book club to whom "it hadn't occurred (…) to read [*Udolpho*]" ("Some of us hadn't even realized it was a real book.") (139). Fowler further lays stress on the tension in reading practices between the cultivated (open-minded) and the naïve (yet prejudiced) reader in Grigg's dialogue with Jocelyn about characters in fiction:

> "I like books about real people," Jocelyn said.
> "I don't understand the distinction." Grigg's eyes had returned to the road. "Elizabeth Bennet is a real person, but the people in science fiction books aren't?"
> "Science fiction books have people in them, but they're not about the people. Real people are really complicated." (173)

The relativity of interpretation in the process of reading, another issue of interest for the academy, is pondered over by Prudie (whose paradoxical espousing of academic reading habits and popular reader enthusiasm has been previously discussed). Interestingly, in her reflections on Austen's reception in the contemporary society, Prudie also brings forth the academic concern about fidelity in film adaptation[10] and her parti pris definitely reminds one of the old-fashioned, yet still enduring, belief in the superiority of literature to film:

> The great thing about books was the solidity of the written word. You might change and your reading might change as a result, but the book remained whatever it had always been. A good book was surprising the first time through, less so the second.
> The movies, as everyone knew, had no respect for this. (82)

The multiplicity, yet arbitrariness, of reader responses is intertextually sustained in the 'coda' to Chapter Two by quotations from letters of publishers who rejected the now highly appreciated *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* when first submitted for publication, as well as from American writers (Mark Twain and Ralph Waldo Emerson) who dismissed Austen's novels as second-rate literature, in utter contrast to subsequent generations of writers and critics who have looked up to them as literary models.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that, in this novel which carries on, in its own terms, the already 'old' tradition of actively and creatively interacting with the Austenian text, the metafictional dimension naturally incorporates illustrative examples in this respect. Bernadette, who "always like[s] to know how a story ends" (199), seems to be satisfied with the details provided by J. E. Austen-Leigh in his *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1869) regarding the way in which Austen herself chose to round off, to the amusement of her family members, the "career of some of her people"

(2002: 119), like Mary and Kitty Bennet. But Allegra proves to be the most ingenious and creates, using famous quotations from Austen's novels, a modified version of the "black Magic 8-Balls" (Fowler 2005: 233), which she names *Ask Austen*, that could give each of the club members the possibility of receiving 'advice' from their "dear", "divine", "matchless" Jane (Johnson 1997: 214). Allegra's initiative is, in fact, the crowning expression of the present-day Janeite's tendency to use Austen "for a goal of self-improvement" (Wells 2011: 22), being thus somewhat akin to those special forms of interactive engagement with Austen's world(s) that are the Austen-inspired advice books (e.g. Lauren Henderson's 2005 *Jane Austen Guide to Dating* and *Jane Austen's Guide to Romance: the Regency Rules*, etc. – see Wells 2011).

Finally, with 'Questions for Discussion' (Fowler 2005: 284-286) (which is one of the paratexts), Fowler takes further her postmodern melange of realism, romance, intertextuality and metafiction, setting the basis for a potential metaleptic dialogue between her characters and her readers on: the themes, characters and style of Austen's novels; Austen's biography; the relationship between reality and fiction; the relationship between the literary text and its film adaptation(s), as well as their impact on the readership/audience; cultural hierarchies; gender relationships; private lives and public interactions; rituals and cultural practices in the contemporary society.

Concluding remarks

An international bestseller at the time of its publication, featuring in "the *New York Times* 100 Notable Books of the Year and *The Australian*'s Book of the Year list" (Simons 2009: 473), available to the readers in printed and audio book form, Karen Joy Fowler's *The Jane Austen Book Club* soon followed what has already become a trend in the "Austen phenomenon", being adapted for the screen in 2007 by Robin Swicord. Unavoidably, the filmic hypertext departed, in many ways, from Fowler's novel. That is not actually something to deplore, as, after all, fidelity in adaptation is unlikely, even undesirable. Most importantly, though, apart from the semiotic differences between novel and film, it was Swicord's reading of *The Jane Austen Book Club* that caused many of the deep meanings of Fowler's postmodernist novel to get 'lost' in adaptation. In Swicord's film, there is little concern about "making *distinctions* but not making *choices* (...) between

the popular and the elite" (Hutcheon 2006: 116). The pastiching of Austenian models, so prominent, yet not slavish, with Fowler is significantly altered and, in some cases, somewhat simplified in the film, which, while still drawing on *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion,* definitely privileges *Pride and Prejudice* as 'everybody's favourite'. The constant movement back and forth in time that was largely responsible for the fragmentation of the novelistic discourse and the introspective plunging into the characters' past are done away with, the film filling occasionally the 'gaps' related to the nature and the past of the characters by mere hints in the protagonists' dialogues. Only the metafictional dimension, strongly anchored in the present of Fowler's participants in the Jane Austen book club, makes it more explicitly to the screen and, even so, is altered, the filmic metatext being clearly focused on the exploration of American amateur readers' response to Austen's novels and the proliferation of the 'cult of Austen' in the contemporary American society. Altogether, with its interest in romance and its emphasis on Austen as "an antidote to our fractured, busy lives" (Swicord qtd. in Fowler 2007: 171), Swicord's film (which unmistakably fits into the category of romantic comedies) provides a better picture of today's Janeitism in the American society than Fowler's novel does. With Fowler, Austen's reception in the contemporary American culture is but one of the many aspects explored with the 'tools' of postmodernism. Fowler's 'lessons' about text production and, especially, text reception, about cultural dynamics and the role of Austen as a catalyst for private emotions and public interactions, are integrated in a cleverly crafted novel that, from behind the 'mask' of chick lit, raises questions about 'reality' and its literary representations, social practices, cultural phenomena and literary hierarchies.

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Notes

[1] In 1923, R. W. Chapman published at Clarendon Press, in five volumes, *The Novels of Jane Austen*, "the first scholarly edition of any English novelist – male or female – to appear", "ever since acknowledged to be the authoritative edition of

[Austen's] works" (Johnson 1997: 218). A few decades later, Professor F. R. Leavis, in his study *The Great Tradition* (1948), "dignifies Austen as well as the great tradition of English fiction she originated by insisting on her moral seriousness" (Johnson 1997: 219). Thus, they have paved the way for "the rise of Austen as an academic field" (Johnson 1997: 221) in development since mid-twentieth century.

[2] Among the numerous texts that have appropriated Austen's work and biography "to accommodate niche markets" (Foster 2008), the following could be mentioned: Arielle Eckstut, *Pride and Promiscuity: The Lost Sex Scenes of Jane Austen*, 2001; Debra White Smith, *Austen Series*, 2004-2006; Linda Berdoll, *Mr Darcy Takes a Wife: Pride and Prejudice Continues*, 2004; Sarah Arthur, *Dating Mr. Darcy: A Smart Girl's Guide to Sensible Romance*, 2005; Seth Graham-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, 2009; P. D. James, *Death Comes to Pemberley*, 2011, etc. For a detailed analysis of 'hybrid' writings produced in the American cultural space, which mingle Austenian patterns with elements of erotica, horror and Christian romance, see Wells 2011: 177-205.

[3] In the filmic adaptation of Fowler's novel (2007, dir. Robin Swicord), Prudie remains an embodiment of the Janeite as "special", "set (...) apart from the contemporary world" (Cobb 2012: 209) because of the "mystical nature" of her relationship with her 'idol', Jane Austen. However, Prudie's Austen-dominated dream vision in the novel is replaced by a "surreal moment" in the film that switches the stress from uneasy mother – daughter relationships, as represented in *Mansfield Park*, to difficult love relationships, as portrayed in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*. In Swicord's film, as Prudie is about to cross the street to meet one of her students, Trey Norton, for a sexual tryst, the signal flashing the words WHAT – WOULD – JANE – DO, and then repeatedly, in red, the words DON'T WALK, determines her to give up the idea of having an affair and to return to her husband Dean, with whom she is reconciled after they read together *Persuasion*. The scene, Shelley Cobb remarks, signifies "otherworldliness about being a reader of Austen", "a distinction reinforced by the postmodern, ironic play on the once ubiquitous Christian bracelet imprinted with the letters WWJD (What Would Jesus Do)" (2012: 208-209).

[4] Fowler chooses to keep her readers in the dark about the reason why Jocelyn invites Grigg to join the book club and merely has Sylvia speculate about it: "Sylvia had always suspected Grigg was intended for her. Of course, she didn't want him, but when had that ever stopped Jocelyn?" (Fowler 2005: 225). The 2007 filmic adaptation of Fowler's novel explicitly points to Grigg's being intended as potential replacement for Sylvia's husband Daniel, thus emphasising the similarity between Jocelyn and Austen's Emma as match-maker figures.

[5] In the 2007 filmic version, Bernadette's role in the plot and her representation as a modern counterpart of one of Austen's characters in *Pride and Prejudice* are significantly reconsidered. As Fowler admits herself, Bernadette is given "a larger

role" in the film, "put[ting] the book club together" and "serv[ing] as a universal confidante and a somewhat bawdy reader of Austen", unlike her "dishevelled, repetitive Bernadette" (Fowler 2007: 170). In addition, Swicord's Bernadette places herself differently in relation to the Austenian world of characters and, in a conversation at the annual fund-raiser for the Sacramento Public Library, claims that she had experienced all the types of marriages presented in *Pride and Prejudice* and identifies herself as the Charlotte Lucas type, as she married at 17 with the first man who proposed to her.

[6] On screen, the love triangle that includes Prudie, her husband Dean and Trey Norton, the student, is amply developed and Prudie is more explicitly shown as thinking herself in love with Trey, indulging in clandestine meetings with the boy she is sexually attracted to, going along with his flirtatious 'games' when she accepts to help him rehearse for the *Brigadoon* performance and almost ready to make the 'final step' of consummating their relationship, from which she is prevented by the 'divine Jane', as shown in Note 1. As far as the evolution of Prudie and Dean's marriage is concerned, it is given new intertextual connotations as it becomes another story about 'second chances' like Austen's *Persuasion*, which the two characters read together and which helps them overcome misunderstandings so that they could be reunited as a couple.

[7] Though she generally praises Swicord's adaptation of her novel for the screen, Fowler feels, nonetheless, sorry to find that, in the film, "Grigg had become a wealthy man". She explains: "Readers still insist on seeing him as an Austen hero when I meant him to be an Austen heroine. I still like him best when he has no money, no connections, nothing that can tempt someone to marry him, beyond his own good heart and impeccable taste in books" (2007: 171).

[8] Commenting on the end of the film adaptation of Fowler's novel, Shelley Cobb remarks that, even though Allegra is shown, at a certain point, enjoying the company of Dr. Yep, the final sequence of the reunion of the Jane Austen book club members at a charity event reveals Allegra without a partner. It is true that "[t]he film does not self-consciously highlight her status. However, as the camera pulls away from the table, it is impossible not to notice all the couples next to each other and Allegra on her own. (…) The specialness of being an Austen reader-fan and the happy endings it offers to the heterosexual white women (…) is not available to (…) the lesbian woman" (2012: 223-224).

[9] Henry James's now famous phrase was originally integrated in a sarcastic comment on the emergence and rapid proliferation of the "cult of Jane Austen" (Lynch 2005: 111) among mass readerships, owing to "the body of publishers, editors, illustrators, producers of the pleasant twaddle of magazines; who have found their 'dear', our dear, everybody's dear, Jane so infinitely to their material purpose, so amenable to pretty reproduction in every variety of what is called tasteful, and in what seemingly proves to be saleable, form" (in Southam 1987:

230). Here, the statement in which James's phrase is enclosed carries no ironic undertones, but literally refers to Fowler's belief that Jane Austen as a literary and cultural icon may transcend highbrow/lowbrow boundaries, as well as challenge and appeal to academic and non-academic readers, women and men, alike.

[10] Surprisingly for a representative of the popular culture, Jocelyn – whom Prudie met "at a Sunday matinee of Mansfield Park" (Fowler 2005: 81) – seems to share Prudie's opinions about film adaptations as disappointingly distorting Austen's fictional worlds. As a matter of fact, both Prudie and Jocelyn seem to voice Fowler's own expectations regarding film adaptations of Austen's work, as expressed by the American writer in the article 'What Would Jane Cut?': "All I want in an Austen movie is perfect fidelity. Jane Bennet is supposed to be prettier than Elizabeth. Is she? Is Mr. Knightley much, much older than Emma, as written? Has Edward Ferrars been made sexier and more charming than he should be? I don't want a more romantic version. I don't want a happier ending. What I want is no monkeying about." (Fowler 2007: 169)

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