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Book Review: Áine Madden: Expanding Austenland: The Pride and Prejudice Fanfiction Archive

2025

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/24453>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Cook, Daniel: Book Review: Áine Madden: Expanding Austenland: The Pride and Prejudice Fanfiction Archive. In: *Fandom | Cultures | Research. Online Journal for Fan and Audience Studies*, Jg. 2 (2025), Nr. 2, S. 112–113. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/24453>.

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Fandom | Cultures | Research
ONLINE JOURNAL FOR FAN AND AUDIENCE STUDIES

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Book Review

Áine Madden: Expanding Austenland: The Pride and Prejudice Fanfiction Archive

KEYWORDS

Jane Austen, fan fiction, profic, adaptation studies, Darcymania, *Pride and Prejudice*

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Daniel Cook

Book Review

**Áine Madden: *Expanding Austenland: The Pride and Prejudice Fanfiction Archive*
Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2023, 334 pp., ISBN 9783031394539, EUR 139.09**

Deborah Yaffe once described Jane Austen as the ultimate crossover artist: an author who has long attracted serious attention from scholars and fans alike. Enter Áine Madden's *Expanding Austenland*, which addresses a particularly potent research area that sits astride both Austen studies and fan studies: the exponential rise of Janeite fan fiction and profic at the end of the 20th century and into the first decades of the 21st. The introduction of the monograph outlines in astonishing detail the undergirding interdisciplinarity of the project, including a helpfully precise indication of where different, if sometimes overlapping, academic fields meet. The second chapter situates *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) in the realm of the pop-cultural fairy tale, specifically the vexed Cinderella story. The third chapter explores Darcymania anew. The fourth looks at virtual reality and games. In the fifth chapter, Madden considers the proliferation of vampires and zombies in recent Austen mashups. The sixth chapter focuses on transmedia storytelling, using *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012-2013) as its main case study. In the seventh and final chapter, Madden reflects on the cultural afterlife of *Pride and Prejudice* during the recent (and ongoing) global pandemic. Collectively, then, each chapter builds towards a comprehensive understanding of the different ways in which fans and fellow authors continue to engage with Austen's most celebrated novel. Beyond Austen studies, this monograph also provides an ideal model for how to survey and analyze fan fiction and profic engagements with canonical literature.

Of major 19th English-language works of fiction, *Pride and Prejudice* has proven to be particularly fertile ground for fan fiction and profic authors in recent years. In preparation, Madden trawled through five major hosts of Austen fan fiction: Bits of Ivory, Epilogue Abbey, Fantasia Gallery, Fanfiction.net, and Archive of Our Own. As of May 29, 2023, an astonishing 10,621 works hosted across those sites explicitly engage with *Pride and Prejudice* (for context, this massively outnumbers engagements with the other extant novels, which amounts to 3,386 works; *Emma* (1815) comes second on the list with a not unreasonable but comparably paltry figure of 963). This leads to at least three procedural problems. First, how might one reasonably analyze such a lengthy list of works on their own terms? One answer would be to trace thematic trends, though this approach risks prioritizing conformity over innovation. And, as one of the key takeaways from Madden's study makes clear, it is the sheer creative range of Austen fan fiction and profic that deserves sustained critical attention. Second, what logistical impediments are there to accessing fan fiction, and how might we overcome them? As Madden notes early on, the oldest fan fiction archive centered on Austen, one hosted on the Republic of Pemberley website, has undergone numerous changes. Currently, this particular archive is no longer accessible—Madden relied on now-dated snapshots via Wayback Machine. Fan fiction is a vibrant creative field that, by definition, never settles. We rely on snapshots, quite literally. Third, what is fan fiction? Or, put another way, at what point can fan fiction lose sight of the host text? Fan fiction is, by definition, creative homage; but, as such, homage implies both expansion and fidelity in different measures. Who

defines these different measurements? *Expanding Austenland* addresses these procedural questions with aplomb.

Beyond data mining, Madden also uses *Pride and Prejudice* fan fiction of the 1990s, as well as bestselling profic texts such as Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* (1996) and the sequels, films, and parodies it has spawned, to "snapshot" (13) the British society of the period. Indeed, this is when Austenmania most visibly flourished, as evidenced by the six major adaptations of Austen that appeared on screen, including Andrew Davies's Darcy-centric *Pride and Prejudice* (1995). By limiting the focus to the cultural legacy of *Pride and Prejudice* and related works at the end of the 20th century and into the early years of the 21st, Madden is able to meaningfully build on the spate of cultural studies of Austenmania that have appeared in recent years, not least of all Claire Harman's *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World* (New York: Picador, 2011) and Devoney Looser's *The Making of Jane Austen* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2017), both of which extended the field beyond (but without jettisoning) literary-critical and filmic frameworks. Madden's new study also contributes to the burgeoning field of women's digital culture, with a nod to the work of Kylie Mirmohamadi, the author of *The Digital Afterlives of Jane Austen: Janeites at the Keyboard* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). This is timely as many resources have become vulnerable amid funding crises and increased pressures on institutional support systems. Digital culture at large is susceptible to technological change, among other things: storage is not preservation. It therefore needs care and attention. Madden's attention to women's digital culture includes a timely exploration of debates surrounding the extent to which some curated online communities are exclusionary or inclusive, whether by design or circumstance. After all, some of these spaces sit behind paywalls or within semi-public listservs. And, as Madden and others suggest, some of the language used on landing pages or in mission statements can be ambiguous at best, cliquey at worst. Put another way, the study of Austen fan fiction raises intriguing questions about the underlying values and priorities of the prosumer reading culture that has become so prevalent today. Relatedly, as Madden notes, not all profic writers identify as fans of Austen, and so not all Austen profic texts are labors of love. Indeed, the selling power of Austen leads to questions about potentially exploitative authorship practices. In sum, Madden's *Expanding Austenland* sets out clear aims and in turn addresses them with a useful blend of evidence and analysis. This monograph will be of particular interest to scholars and students in Austen studies and fan studies, along with many related fields of inquiry.

