

## Those Marrying Men

**The Matters at Mansfield; Or, The Crawford Affair. A Mr. & Mrs. Darcy Mystery**

Carrie Bebris.  
Forge, 2008.  
286 pages. Hardcover. \$22.95

**Lydia Bennet's Story: A Sequel to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice***

Jane Odiwe.  
Sourcebooks, 2008.  
356 pages. Paperback. \$12.95

Reviewed by Kelly M. McDonald.

A good opening line can instantly vitalize a novel. Chapter One of Carrie Bebris's mystery *The Matters at Mansfield* spins Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* opening: "It is a truth less frequently acknowledged, that a good mother in possession of single child, must be in want of sleep." The humor behind that thought is well maintained throughout the novel and compensates for a somewhat-convoluted plot. In her *P&P* sequel *Lydia Bennet's Story*, Jane Odiwe also sets her scene exceedingly well: "The true misfortune, which besets any young lady who believes herself destined for fortune and favour, is to find that she has been born into an unsuitable family." The two books share many characteristics: they grab the reader from the beginning; sustain momentum; and present work of talented authors. They likewise extract from Austen two bad boys everyone loves to hate, Henry Crawford and George Wickham, and pivot their denouements upon ill-advised marriages, for ultimately these men stray from the fold.

In *The Matters at Mansfield*, a complex matrimonial game pits Elizabeth Darcy against Lady Catherine de Bourgh when Elizabeth unwittingly encourages Anne de Bourgh to elope with the dashing Henry Crawford. Anne's alternative?

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The brutish heir of an elderly but wealthy Lord Sennex, hand-picked by Lady Catherine. Anne exhibits all the underdog disadvantages, and readers will cheer for her ultimate happiness.

Once the lovers run off, with her outraged mother and others in pursuit, the scene gravitates to Mansfield; this, of course, pulls Henry Crawford into the Bertrams' orbit. Saying too much about the plot would give its surprises and twists away, yet it is these maneuverings that could have stood slight refinement. Austen already painted Henry Crawford as a man who likes the ladies, but Bebris provides him with *so many* women. Not only does he again meet Mrs. Rushworth (aka Maria Bertram), he is given a former flame, Meg, who pursues him like Donna Elvira trailing Don Giovanni. While Meg invites commiseration, Anne unnecessarily hangs in limbo. Once Anne's actions have set everything in motion, this sympathetic character has less to do than she should have—literally so, since Anne is laid up by a carriage accident (the reason for their stay at Mansfield). *Three* betrayed women, especially given the late entry of Maria Rushworth, obscures the issue. Maria might have been utilized in Meg's stead, but it was difficult to accomplish that without jettisoning a hitherto-unknown Crawford peccadillo which propels the story. Bebris also inveigles a demise for Henry Crawford that plays well once but is less convincing the second time: two duels occur in which Henry may—or may not—be the victim. Judicious tightening could have made *The Matters at Mansfield* a "thumping good read." As it is, the ride from beginning to end is enjoyable because of nice character portraits and a witty writing style, which will undoubtedly gain Bebris future readers for this series. (*Mansfield* is her fourth Mr. & Mrs. Darcy mystery.)

Blending narrative with diary extracts, Jane Odiwe presents Lydia Bennet in all her giddy, officer-hungry glory. Odiwe's subtle and pointed conveyance of a character's manners or foibles in a few words

is a delight—an example, Lydia's asides concerning her mother. While burning an unwanted gift from a potential lover, Lydia comments, "It caught the attention of my mother who is generally not so observant but she has a suspicious nature." Mrs. Bennet is seen only through Lydia's eyes, and this manner of characterization is Odiwe's asset, especially when dealing with the popular Darcys and Bingleys. She paints the two couples very lightly, and thereby avoids upsetting the reverence they generate in many Austen fans. *Lydia Bennet's Story* stands on its own, though the action and characters from *P&P* are utilized as needed, usually via a few deft references.

Lydia's time in Brighton, among the uniforms she so adores, comprises the early section of the novel; by mid-point she and Wickham have been discovered by Darcy and are wed, though happiness is definitely not on their horizon. Wickham is already on the outlook for his next conquest, and the diary device allows revelations of Lydia's more secret traits. Concerning her move to Newcastle, the new Mrs. Wickham discloses, "What I would really like is a house on the higher slopes of town where the wealthy are settling, not timbered lodgings in the old part of town." One spouse with a roving eye, the other with illusions of grandeur, spells trouble.

Readers who wish for a little sensuality in their Austen might welcome Lydia's gentle trysts, though one might expect a bit more effort on Mr. Wickham's part for this overt cad to have won his Lydia. His real competition comes from the Rev. Alexander Fitzalan, brother of Lydia's friend Isabella. This pair undeniably forms the romantic center of the novel. Readers will stay up late in order to finish *Lydia Bennet's Story* quickly and leave well pleased with a nice narrative.

