

Val McDermid's *Northanger Abbey*: Lost in Translation

Northanger Abbey

By Val McDermid.

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Review by Nora Foster Stovel.

The HarperCollins project for adapting Austen's novels to the contemporary world launched in 2013–14 with Joanna Trollope's *Sense and Sensibility*, and followed by Alexander McCall Smith's *Emma*—(both of which I had the pleasure of reviewing recently for *JASNA News*), continues with Val McDermid's *Northanger Abbey* (2014).

McDermid modernizes her characters emphatically. “Cat” is more outspoken than Catherine, especially with Johnnie Thorpe, whose buggy is replaced by a red sports car, while his interests focus on computer games. Indeed, McDermid's jeans and T-shirt clad heroine explodes in coarse expletives, the insipid lingo of “Bella” is sprinkled with “like,” “duh,” and “totes amazeballs,” and her “bro” swears by “Buggering barnacles.”

Like Trollope and Smith, McDermid sprinkles her narrative with contemporary technological gadgets. Characters are constantly texting each other, employing abbreviations such as “BGF,” “LOL,” and “CU.” Such modernizations can create anachronisms, however, as the reader wonders why the characters cannot simply text each other regarding their changes of plans, thus avoiding many unnecessary embarrassments and confusions.

McDermid's most brilliant adaptation may be replacing Bath with Edinburgh—the “Athens of the North.” She justifies this switch by having Mr. Allen, who is involved in theatre, wherein he has made his fortune, in the habit of making his “August pilgrimage” to the Fringe. Advantages include lots of theatrical activities, plus sightings of celebrities, including Stephen Fry, and a glimpse of Margaret Atwood buying hats (Peggy

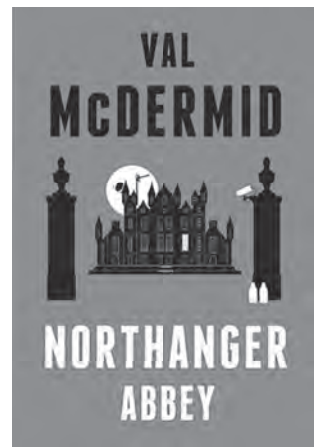
doesn't wear hats, Val). The Scottish setting allows McDermid, a Scot herself, to draw on her superior acquaintance with the country.

McDermid is not as successful in translating Catherine Morland's obsession with the gothic into Cat's interest in vampires or gothic fiction and the *Twilight* novel and film series. She attempts to infuse vampire characteristics into Henry Tilney—surely the prototype of common sense and good humour in Austen's narrative—by endowing him with “a wolfish grin” and sinister tawny eyes, “like a lion stalking prey.” The vampire motif fares better when the action moves to Northanger Abbey, situated in the Border country near Newcastle, and the genuinely sinister General Tilney. Cat googles the General and discovers that he is a hero of the Falklands War. Henry Tilney, a lawyer, supports Cat's vampire interests by referring to himself as a “devil,” his boss as a “devil master,” and his job as “devilling”—Scottish legal terms, according to McDermid.

McDermid, a crime writer best known for her suspense novels featuring Dr. Tony Hill, has Cat's visit to Northanger Abbey transform into a detective quest. Cat suspects Mrs. Tilney was the victim of domestic abuse and is perhaps imprisoned in the disused tower, like Mrs. Rochester. The housekeeper's name, Mrs. Danvers, recalls Daphne du Maurier's sinister servant. Cat learns Henry and Ellie's mother's death was caused by leukemia, inspiring her to exclaim, “That sucks!”

Tolstoy's pronouncement, “All happy families are alike, while each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” applies perfectly to the Morlands and Tilneys. But new BGFs Cat and Ellie manage to bridge that gap, as they plan to collaborate on a series of comedy vampire stories for children, drawing on Cat's literary interests and Ellie's artistic talents and triggering suspicions of lesbianism. Cat's sentimental education introduces her to real, as opposed to imaginary, evil in the form of the General's callous

treatment of herself, when he ejects her from Northanger Abbey after learning from John Thorpe that the Morlands are “scint.”



While Austen characteristically declines to favor her reader with declarations of love from her heroes or detailed descriptions of the weddings of her heroines, McDermid concludes with an epilogue four years later, wherein Cat and Henry, after living together for some time while Cat nannies and Henry lawyers, tie the knot.

Where Trollope and Smith's modern retellings of Austen's novels are adaptations, McDermid's is more a translation, translating Austen's narrative faithfully, even slavishly, chapter by chapter and paragraph by paragraph into contemporary parlance. The scintillating syntax enriched by Austen's arch irony which distinguishes the original, however, is lost in translation. While McDermid's modernization may not be as successful as Trollope's or Smith's—perhaps because *Northanger Abbey* is not as brilliant a novel as *Sense and Sensibility* or *Emma*—it does return readers to Austen's original with renewed appreciation.

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