

Curtis Sittenfeld's *Eligible*

Eligible

By Curtis Sittenfeld.

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Review by Nora Foster Stovel.

Prepare yourself for a treat! Curtis Sittenfeld's new modernization of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*—*Eligible*—is delightful. Of the three Harper Collins updates of Austen's novels that I have had the pleasure of reviewing recently for *JASNA News*—including Joanna Trollope's *Sense and Sensibility*, Val McDermid's *Northanger Abbey* and Alexander McCall Smith's *Emma*—Curtis Sittenfeld's *Eligible* is the most scintillating.

Sittenfeld's is also the most daring adaptation thus far, changing the scene as radically as the Bollywood film *Bride and Prejudice*. She sets the scene in the USA—in her hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio. The epigraph from Mark Twain sets the tone: “When the end of the world comes, I want to be in Cincinnati because it's always twenty years behind the times.” Whereas Trollope, McDermid, and Smith are British, Sittenfeld is American; hence her adaptation shows Austen both modernized and Americanized—or are they the same thing? To modernize the scenario, she plays with LGBT topics, especially lesbianism and transgender issues.

Sittenfeld's most daring departure is setting her drama against the backdrop of “the juggernaut reality-television show *Eligible*”—a dating reality show on which Chip Bingley, the bachelor surrounded by twenty-five women, became famous as the “*Eligible* crybaby” after bursting into tears in the final episode when he couldn't choose either final contestant because he felt no “soul connection.” His participation in the show was arranged by his manager—his sister, Caroline Bingley—although he claimed he was “looking for love.”

Sittenfeld's dramatis personae vary from Austen's. Whereas Cincinnati may be twenty years behind the times, Sittenfeld moves her characters twenty years ahead. Jane and “Liz” are getting perilously close to forty, Mary is thirty, and Kitty and Lydia are in their twenties. Only the elder two are gainfully employed—Jane as a yoga instructor and Liz as a journalist (with a typewriter tattooed on her back!) who writes a column on “Women Who Dare” for *Mascara* magazine. Mary is a perpetual student working on-line on her third master's degree, although her Tuesday nights out remain a mystery. Kitty and Lydia, both spectacularly foul-mouthed, spend their time at CrossFit.

Mrs. Bennet, a veritable shopaholic who fetishizes over décor, filling Jane's old room with sixty-one boxes, many still unopened, is just too bad to be true, while Mr. Bennet is even more sardonic than Austen's original. Mr. Collins is transformed into Willie, a media tycoon, a “tech doofus.” Fitzwilliam Darcy is a neurosurgeon. Georgie, who calls her brother “Fitzy,” is a graduate student at Stanford, and Pemberley is situated in the posh San Francisco suburb of Atherton, California. The fencing involved in Liz's love-hate relationship with Darcy places her in positions that may shock Janeites.

Jasper Wick, a journalist for *Sporty* magazine, pining for the editorship of *Dude*, is well named, as he likes to dip his wick—in Liz, to be specific. She has been mooning after him for fourteen years, with a four-year hiatus after he invited her to be “a groomsman” at his wedding to Susan. Although he and Susan subsequently fell out, he cannot get a divorce because her wealthy nonagenarian grandmother (he claims) will cut her out of her will. Wick and Darcy were classmates at Stanford, although Wick's shameful secret expulsion inspired their hostility.

Kathy de Burgh is a Gloria Steinem style feminist media celebrity. The ten-minute interview her publicist keeps dangling like a carrot before Liz creates one of the running gags of the novel.

The family is reunited when Mr. Bennet suffers a heart attack, bringing Jane and Liz home from New York City, where they have spent the last fifteen

years. The family's Tudor home, they discover, like their parents' marriage and bank balance, is in acute disrepair. Mrs. Bennet is too busy organizing the Women's League luncheon to care for her recuperating husband or their deteriorating home.

Whereas Liz doesn't want children, Jane, hearing her biological clock ticking, is, believe it or not, trying artificial insemination, creating problems for Chip, whose family made their pile manufacturing bathroom fixtures, making Jane the “crapper queen.” *Eligible* reaches a crescendo when it televises the wedding of Chip and Jane as the grand finale of its season.

Intriguing as these transformations in the dramatis personae undoubtedly are, they also raise several problems. Why are attractive Jane and Liz still single, and why is Jane reduced to resorting to artificial insemination, relying on “some dude's jizz” in Lydia's words, to get pregnant? Why does a smart chick like Liz pine after a loser like Wick for fourteen years? Indeed, is it likely that a couple in mid-twentieth-century America would have five daughters?

Despite the fact that Sittenfeld's *Eligible* is 492 pages, I wished it were longer. In fact, after I finished reading it, I started all over again.

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