



THE

Jane Austen  
RULES

A CLASSIC GUIDE  
TO MODERN LOVE

'A delightful mash-up of Jane Austen and *The Rules*, this modern guide to romance is pure stout-hearted charm.'

—AMY DICKINSON, 'Ask Amy' advice  
columnist and NPR contributor

SINÉAD MURPHY

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RULES

A CLASSIC GUIDE  
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SINÉAD MURPHY

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To my mother, Joan, whose love of literature meant that I read Jane Austen when I was still very young

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*'After all, there is no enjoyment like reading!'*

# THE REAL THING

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It *ought to be* a truth universally acknowledged, that a young woman in possession of a large number of modern dating guides must be in want of Jane Austen! Why? Because the novels of Jane Austen are still our *safest* guide to the rough-and-tumble course that is true love. The aim of this book is to prove that this is so.

But can Jane Austen's novels *really* offer advice that our bestselling dating books cannot? What, after all, can they really have to tell us, that we have not now been told at least a hundred times over? – That women have substance to them, that is what! That women are *the real thing*.

When Jane Austen began to publish, around the beginning of the nineteenth century, novels were not yet all that popular. Young ladies instead passed their time by reading *conduct books*, Regency England's equivalent of the modern dating guide, full of dos and don'ts for the woman who wished to flourish in society. Gradually, however, women began to spend less and less time reading conduct books and more and more time reading novels, which also provided advice on what a woman should and should not do, but in a manner that was much more entertaining and – very importantly! – much more *emancipatory*.

You see, the Regency conduct book tended to judge a woman by how she conducts herself – that is, by how she *acts*, by how she *seems*. The novel, by contrast, was concerned with what women are *really* like, admitting – perhaps for the very first time – that women do not have a fulsome interior life, with thoughts and feelings that are as crucial to get right as the actions that follow from them. In the novel it was much more important that a woman cultivate herself than that she learn how to *appear* to do so, much more crucial that she be truly worthy than that she learn how to make herself *seem* so. In the novel, in other words, women were allowed to be *real*, and not merely the cardboard cut-outs to whom the conduct book directed its advice.

And Jane Austen was at the forefront of it all, presenting to the Regency world a host of real women – so determined to do so, indeed, that she invented her very own narrative style, which gives the reader almost unrestricted access to the internal life of her female characters. The Regency conduct book stood very little chance, once Jane Austen's women of flesh-and-blood began to appear on the scene!

In the light of which, ought it not to be all but impossible that the conduct book would once again become women's literature of choice? What an idea! – that we might turn a second time to a genre that holds our sex in such contempt. And yet, we have done it – our bestseller lists are clogged these days with dating guides that revive the terrible premise: that women have *really* nothing about them, and must resort to rules of *conduct* to have any chance of love.

'Don't you have somewhere to go or something to do? Or can you pretend you do?' ask the authors of one of these bestselling guides. 'You want to seem like you are interested in politics, sports, and the world in general, not just guys!' But why must women merely *seem*



like they are interested in politics, sports and the world in general? Are they not really so? Not according to the modern dating guide, which, like its Regency conduct book ancestor, has little, if any, faith in women and so would spend our energies on *seeming*.

One evening, in the drawing room at Netherfield Hall, *Pride and Prejudice*'s Caroline Bingley – clearly an avid reader of the Regency conduct book! – holds forth on what it is for a woman to be ‘accomplished.’ Her list of requirements is a long one – it extends so far as to demand ‘certain something’ in the tone of a woman’s voice! – but it is solely concerned with the project of *seeming*, of a woman’s *appearing* to have something of interest about her.

Miss Bingley is quickly corrected by Mr Darcy, who reveals his true regard for the female sex by insisting that a *really* accomplished woman must ‘add something more substantial, the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.’ But just look at how blinkered is Miss Bingley’s response: the very next evening, she is found with a book in her hand, it is true, but a book she has chosen only because it is the second volume of the book Mr Darcy has chosen. Her attention, we are told is ‘quite as much engaged in watching Mr Darcy’s progress through *his* book, as in reading her own,’ and, though she loudly declares to the company, that ‘after all there is no enjoyment like reading,’ she follows this statement by yawning and throwing her book aside, ‘quite exhausted by the attempt to be amused with it!’ Miss Bingley, you see, is a woman who thinks only of *conduct*, and is therefore incapable of the ‘something more substantial’ which Mr Darcy so justly demands.

‘Don’t you have somewhere to go or something to do? Or can you pretend you do?’ – such is the guidance offered by the authors of *The Rules*. They might as well have said, ‘Don’t you have something to read? Or can you pretend you do?’ – for, the modern dating guide, just like Caroline Bingley, is wholly dedicated to *seeming*. It is enough that a woman strike a pose, enough that a woman play a part, enough that a woman act as if, enough that a woman *conduct herself*.

But if this does not suffice to make us loathe the very notion of conduct, if we find ourselves now and then still browsing in the conduct section of our nearest bookstore, then we might as well consider this: devoting ourselves to seeming may not succeed even on its own terms! The subtitle of *The Rules* promises to reveal secrets for ‘capturing the heart of Mr Darcy Right,’ but Caroline Bingley, for all her efforts to seem like a reader in the drawing room at Netherfield Hall, fails to capture the heart of Mr Darcy – ‘She could not win him,’ we are told. And why not? Because men, in general, want more than mere *conduct*. Men, in general, want more than cardboard cut-outs. Men, in general, desire the real thing!

Think, then, of how fortunate we modern women are, to have the novels of Jane Austen turn to once again! – so that we might rediscover what our Regency sisters learned for the very first time: that *real* women really do have somewhere to go and something to do, that *real* women really are interested in politics, sports and the world in general, that *real* women really do read books – in short, that *real* women are *the real thing*!

\* \* \*

Jane Austen did share *something* with the conduct book: she too believed we could do with a little guidance now and then, especially in the complex matter of love. The idea of our having

a few simple rules was not, therefore, one to which she objected. But there are two different kinds of rules: there are rules for conduct and there are rules for *character*; there are rules for seeming and there are rules for *really being*. There are rules, in other words, and there are *Jane Austen* rules. And only the second are worth our following.

Two hundred years ago, Jane Austen's novels triumphed over the conduct book, on the strength of her conviction that women are *the real thing*. Let us only rise to that very same conviction, and her novels are sure to triumph once again.



*Do we not know that we ought to be too heavy for even a grown-up man to carry?*

## BE A WOMAN, NOT A *GIRL*

‘Be a Creature Unlike Any Other’ is the very first rule of that bestselling guide, *The Rules*. It is a rallying cry, for self-expression and -realization. It is, however, sadly misconceived, riddled with the kind of rivalry that has beleaguered us women for centuries. In 1949, the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir wrote that women have been and still are ‘the second sex’ because of their reluctance to say ‘we women,’ their wont to isolate themselves from other women, to regard other women as competition. Already with their very first rule, then, the *Rules* authors would place us women in an age-old human trap, which, by dividing us, works to conquer us.

One evening, again in the drawing room at Netherfield, Miss Bingley observes that Elizabeth Bennet is one of those young ladies who seek to recommend themselves to the other sex by undervaluing their own. But it is, she concludes, ‘a paltry device.’ Miss Bingley, of course, is employing the device herself at this moment, seeking to recommend herself to Mr Darcy by undervaluing the merits of Elizabeth.

But she is right, at least in this: looking to promote oneself at the expense of other women, setting oneself up as a creature unlike any other, is a paltry device, and one that has kept women ‘in our place’ for as much of time as history can recall.

But there is worse. De Beauvoir imagined our biggest problem to be our reluctance to say ‘we.’ She little knew how far we had yet to fall. For, now it seems our biggest problem is our reluctance even to say ‘women’! *The Rules* addresses its advice almost invariably to ‘the girl,’ construing its reader as not only jealous of other members of her sex, but hardly herself a fully paid-up member! When it comes to that paltry device, of seeking to recommend ourselves to the opposite sex by undervaluing our own sex, there is surely nothing more paltry than this refusal even to admit that it is our own sex! Of course, it is a serious hindrance to women’s fight for equality, if we do not seek solidarity with our kind; but it is a worse hindrance again, if we do not even identify with our kind!

Jane Austen might seem a surprising precursor for the likes of Simone de Beauvoir, and yet the first Jane Austen rule is right up de Beauvoir’s alley: be a woman, not a girl, it advises, and make the very best you can of your biological and cultural destiny; be a woman, not a girl, it commands, and give yourself at least a fighting chance of improving on that dreaded second place!

*Persuasion* is the novel above all others in which this Jane Austen precept is set down, pitting the froth-and-foam attractions of the *girl* against the so-much-more-substantial merits of the *woman*. It is not quite pistols at dawn, but it might as well be! It is after breakfast, on the Cobb at Lyme: Louisa Musgrove makes a foolish leap and lies crumpled and unconscious on the ground, while Anne Elliot, Louisa’s rival for the love of Captain Wentworth, remains strong and unscathed, undisputed mistress of the scene. Anne does not stand over her

opponent in victory, admittedly, rather bending over her in womanly concern, against backdrop of foam breaking harmlessly over the granite of the pier. But it is a victory nonetheless, as Louisa makes a quiet exit from the novel, and a revived and blooming Anne assumes first place, at centre stage.

Anne Elliot is twenty-seven years old at the opening of *Persuasion*, twenty-eight at its close. She is the oldest of Jane Austen's heroines by a considerable distance, and would have been judged by the standards of her time as well and truly departed from girlhood. 'A few years before,' the opening chapter tells us, 'Anne Elliot *had been* a very pretty girl.' Those years are gone. But it is this, it turns out, that is her greatest strength. For, compared with the womanly fortitude of Anne Elliot, the ephemeral claims of Louisa Musgrove will always leave *her* an 'also ran.'

Louisa Musgrove's flirtation with Captain Wentworth consists of little more than jumping over stiles and off steps so that he might catch her in his arms as a father does his child. Little wonder the female sex persists in being the second sex, if this is the way its members tend to behave! And it is. For, Louisa Musgrove's childish overtures towards Captain Wentworth capture precisely the mode of relation into which books like *The Rules* would place us all, and they impart to us a myriad of tricks and schemes to provoke our man into being what we thought manly – rendering should-be women into grotesquely strapping schoolgirls, cramming tips on how to squeeze into a gymslip! Cannot we see that we look incongruous in this pre-pubescent guise? Do not we know that we *ought* to be too heavy for even a grown-up man to carry? There are, of course, very different roles to which the sexes are assigned in our society. And there is often little merit in refusing them. But to *force* them, as Louisa does, to seek always to heighten their effect, is not only unnecessary, it is undignified. And, worst of all, it keeps us women from being womanly, by preoccupying us with ensuring that men are manly!

The fact is, we women ought to be far less anxious than *The Rules* book and its like would have us be. For the fact is, a good man will be manly pretty much of his own accord. He will help us over stiles and guide us down steps, and do a million more essential manly things without our ever having to pressure him to do so. Indeed, if we pressure him to do so, and in having made him do so, we pressure him to do so again and again, he will, in the end, let us down. Compare Louisa Musgrove's childish lurchings with Anne Elliot's quiet, independent progress on the walk to Hayters' farm, making her way carefully and on her own, and becoming the object of Captain Wentworth's care and concern when he observes her fatigue *for himself* and takes decisive, careful action to relieve it. Who can forget that moment when *unsolicited by Anne*, he places his hands gently but firmly around her waist and assists her into Admiral Croft's gig, to be driven the rest of the journey home? How much more affecting, how much more romantic, how much more *sustainable*, this, than all the girlish leapings and fatherly catchings in the world! And that is but the beginning of Captain Wentworth's self-originating manliness, for he arrives very quickly at a point at which he must and does exert all his energies to secure Anne Elliot's *unoutstretched* hand.

It is true, of course, that the *girls* in Jane Austen's novels do many of them find love in some shape or form. For, girls are most of them pleasant enough – Louisa Musgrove, for one, is described as an 'amiable, sweet-tempered girl.' (This, as it happens, would make her a perfect candidate for *The Rules*, which advises that, on the first three dates, we be 'sweet and

light' and 'like a summer breeze.') But girls lack punch, to use a pithy kind of phrase, and are good for little else than *seconding* a man. Behind every great man is a great woman, so the saying goes. But it does not go right. For, *behind* any kind of man – in that unseen, unheard supporting role – can only ever be a *girl*.

A sweeping glance at the litany of Jane Austen's girls suffices to prove this painful point. Lucy Steele of *Sense and Sensibility* is nothing more than a means of relieving the boredom of Edward who, when he finally meets a woman in Elinor, bitterly regrets his early engagement and desires nothing but to escape from it; Maria Bertram of *Mansfield Park* is but Henry Crawford's instrument for revenging Fanny's refusal of him, and is tossed aside when she is no longer useful; Isabella Thorpe of *Northanger Abbey* is merely the excuse for Captain Tilney's sowing his wild oats, and is abandoned without security or prospect when the Captain has moved on to someone else; foolish Lydia of *Pride and Prejudice* is a last-minute impulse of Mr Wickham, who requires to flee his debtors and thinks that he might as well bring a willing young companion along with him for distraction; and poor hapless Harriet is paid compliments by the ambitious Mr Elton only as a stepping stone to Emma Woodhouse whose hand in marriage is really his first object.

And what of Jane Austen's poster-girl? What of Louisa Musgrove, who in the end marries the estimable Captain Benwick? All in the novel are surprised at this outcome. Is it our own counterexample to the second-class status of the girl? It is not. For, the only plausible explanation for the match is that Benwick requires a substitute, to console him for the loss of his wife, Fanny Harville, and will content himself with the first one who (literally!) falls at his feet. Louisa will never be more than second best in Captain Benwick's heart, for a woman, even a dead woman!, will always trump a girl.

Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove are described when first we meet them, as 'like thousands of other young ladies, living to be fashionable and merry.' And that just about sums them up as two girls among a thousand girls; two girls in a job lot; two girls whom no one will recall. Admiral Croft declares himself defeated by the effort to distinguish them—'I hardly know one from the other!' he cries. And even Captain Wentworth seems confused, it being unclear for most of the novel which of them he is actually courting! And when the Admiral begins to inform Anne of Louisa's engagement to Captain Benwick, he has first to be reminded of Louisa's name. 'I wish young ladies had not such a number of fine christian names,' he complains. 'I should never be out, if they were all Sophys, or something of that sort.' What the Admiral really wishes, of course, is that young ladies did not so completely disappear into a mass of girls in which it is impossible to distinguish them, but comported themselves more like Sophy, his sensible, well-informed, *womanly* wife.

Towards the close of *Persuasion*, Captain Wentworth reflects on the eight long years since he and Anne first fell in love. 'It is a period, indeed!' he says. 'Eight years and a half is a period.' And it is – by far the longest test of constancy to which Jane Austen subjects any of her characters. And all in pursuit of the very simple point: that a *woman* is well worth the remembering. A girl, by contrast, is eminently forgettable, and for a really quite obvious reason – Everybody knows that Neil Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon ... but do many remember Buzz Aldrin, the second man to do so? Edmund Hillary will go down in the annals as the first man to the summit of Mount Everest ... but will any recall Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, the second man to reach it? When should-be women are content to live as girls, the

can never escape their fate as the second sex, and the second sex, like the second everything, will always be forgotten.

In the delicious early days of their reconciliation, Captain Wentworth assures his Anne that that eight-and-a-half-year period, between their first and second engagements, is as nothing. 'To my eye,' he declares, 'you could never alter.' Naturally, we must allow something here for the partial blindness to which any true love consigns us. Anne certainly does, reflecting with some amusement, that 'it is something for a woman to be assured, in her eight-and-twentieth year, that she has not lost one charm of earlier youth'! Yet, there is no denying the truth in the Captain's compliment. For, it was the *woman* in Anne he had always admired, and women, like all who come in first, are not to be diminished by months or by years. Mere girls may have a limited shelf life, but women, like the wine with which they are often compared, are only ever improved by the passage of time.

Simone de Beauvoir wisely saw that women are held back by not saying 'we.' But Jane Austen saw something even more fundamental: that women are held back by not saying 'women.' Then, let us, this instant, determine to be *women*! Let us hold up our heads and speak with assurance, as Lizzy does with Darcy during that awkward first dance at Netherfield Hall. Let us have conviction and live by it, as Elinor does when she promotes the fortunes of Edward so that he might more easily marry his foolish Lucy. Let us, like Emma, have opinions and not be afraid to air them. Let us, like Marianne, have ideals and not be afraid to pursue them. Let us, like Catherine, be intrigued by the world and alive to its wonders. Let us, like Fanny, be serious and composed and as steadfast as can be. And let the words of Captain Wentworth be as truly said of us as they are of Anne: 'A man does not recover from devotion to the heart of such a *woman*! – He ought not – he does not.'



*We are not children, reaching wilfully for the thing that looks the sweetest.*

## FIND A MAN, NOT A *GUY*

‘Most men are content to sit around in a recliner on a Saturday afternoon and drink beer and watch football.’ So say the authors of *The Rules*. And their advice? ‘Take up a hobby, presumably so you have something to do while he is thus otherwise engaged. But Jane Austen’s advice is somewhat different: when confronted with the scene just described, do not find yourself a hobby; rather, find yourself a *man*! There is nothing inherently objectionable about recliners, beer, football, or Saturday afternoons, of course; many a couple may *together* enjoy any combination of these delights as often as they choose. But when a man is content to enjoy them on his own, and with such a degree of indifference to you as to consign you to the desperate measure of taking up a hobby, then that man is not a man but, to use my favourite *Rules* word, a *guy*. And there are at least as many reasons for not dating a *guy* as there are for not being a *girl*.

Freud had a theory about boys, in which boys are so envious of their father that all they can think of is overthrowing him, by the simple means of killing him and marrying the mother. A somewhat bloody scenario, it is true, but (so long as it remains fantasy!) a natural phase in the progression of boys into men – according to Freud at least. But some boys just get stuck, and spend their whole life in defiance of father-figures and desirous of mother-figures. These boys never grow into men. Instead, they grow into *guys*.

Naturally, the term ‘guy’ was not abroad in Jane Austen’s time, but we need not much concern ourselves with that. For, the condition it describes was almost as common then as it is now. Jane Austen’s novels are full of *guys*, and, much more relevant to this volume, of the women they would make into their *mothers*.

Perhaps Jane Austen’s most perfect example of a *guy* is Mr Frank Churchill, that charming creature who wreaks such havoc in the little village of Highbury in which the novel *Emma* is set. He is introduced to the reader of *Emma*, as he is to the residents of Highbury, well before he makes an appearance in the flesh, a visit from him so long anticipated by his father, Mr Weston, that his failure to make it is a topic for discussion among all in the village. He is talked of as coming, but does not come; he promises to come, but does not come; he makes arrangements to come, but does not come; he is expected to come, but does not come. Even Emma, who is inclined to be rather taken with the idea of Frank Churchill, admits that ‘he ought to come,’ that ‘one cannot comprehend a young *man*’s being under such restraint, as not to be able to spend a week with his father, if he likes it.’

And Emma has touched upon the truth: for, Frank Churchill does *not* like it, but likes only to give rise to the anticipation of it, so that poor Mr Weston might be driven to greater and greater lengths in finding lame excuses for his son. If ever there was a way to kill your father slowly and by a thousand cuts, then this is it. The fact that Frank Churchill has long ago relinquished his father’s name in favour of the name of his adoptive mother proves the point.



conclusively: here is what Freud would call a case of the Oedipus Complex; here is what Jane Austen would call a 'coxcomb,' a 'puppy,' a 'trifling and silly fellow'; here is what we would call a *guy*.

And who is the woman so ill-advised as to have involved herself with this guy? Miss Jane Fairfax, as disapproving yet forgiving as ever a devoted *mother* could have been. She is neglected by Frank, toyed with by Frank, made witness to Frank's follies and the butt of Frank's jokes; she is forced, time and again, to discipline Frank, by exhortation and by example: but still she stands by him, loyal and loving to the end. She feels the burden of having found a *guy*, certainly, being prone to such low spirits that she seems likely, at one point, to break down entirely. This is explained at the time, by her having very soon to enter upon the life of a governess in order to earn her living. But, as we discover at the novel's close, Jane Fairfax was never in danger of having to become a governess, being all along secretly betrothed to Frank Churchill. Then, why the low spirits? Why the melancholic focus on the trials of being a governess? Why such despair, at a fate she knows she will never have to face? Because it is a fate she knows she *will* have to face, destined as she is for a lifetime ministrations to a *guy* who might as well be a very unruly child!

During one highly charged scene in the novel, Jane Fairfax likens the governess-trade to the slave-trade; they are 'widely different certainly as to the guilt of those who carry it on,' she admits, 'but as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies.' Poor Jane Fairfax!: confronted with a future in which she will have to combine the corrective vigilance of the governess with the unalloyed devotion of the slave; a future, that is, in which she will have to be a mother to her *guy*.

Then why does Jane Fairfax stick with him? Why does she not simply leave her *guy*? She clearly suffers from the relationship, and intermittently shows signs of wanting to end it. Why, then, does she not do it? It is a mystery, indeed. Until, that is, you ask yourself this: about how many women might we wonder the same, women who are troubled by the relationship, exploited in their relationship, exhausted with their relationship, but nonetheless stick with their relationship? The mystery about Jane Fairfax, it turns out, is the most common-place mystery of them all, and explained by this single simple fact: that it is not easy, in fact it is sometimes impossible, to say good-bye! to a *guy*.

Given which difficulty, it behoves us to be very careful of never saying hi! to a *guy* – hence the second Jane Austen rule. How curious, then, that one has to wait for the *twenty-second* rule in the second *edition* of *The Rules* for a similar warning, for a single chapter devoted to the idea that there is such a thing as Mr *Wrong*. And even then, *The Rules* concludes by observing that one woman's Mr *Wrong* 'is another woman's Mr *Right*!' For all that is to be said about women, it seems, *The Rules* has little definitive to say on the topic of men.

Why this lack of consideration, we may ask, of a matter that is nearly the most pressing of all? Why this lack of urgency, this *laissez-faire*? The answer lies not so very far away: in the title of the chapter in question, in which the type of man one ought to avoid is described as 'buyer beware.'

We are accustomed nowadays to thinking of almost everything as a commodity, to be bought and sold on the market. We buy an education, a home, child care, even youth!, so why not think in terms of buying a *guy*? But there is at least one reason why not, and it is this: no matter how expensive a purchase we make, we are always more prepared to cash

that purchase than we are for cashing in a *guy*. Because a *guy*, for all his faults, is still human and can therefore inspire feelings of attachment that a mere commodity never can. It is a category mistake by the authors of *The Rules*, to imagine for a moment that it is as if we are buying a *guy*. And it is a costly mistake too, for, though you may sell your house and trade in your car, you may never be able to make an exchange on your *guy*! NEXT! shouts *The Rules* when a man proves himself to be less than he seemed he might be. But a mere NEXT! will not, and ought not, suffice to be rid of a fellow human being. Better take the whole thing much more seriously, then, and devote a *second* rule, not a *twenty-second* rule, to finding a man and not a *guy*.

And there is an even greater urgency to this issue when we realize that *guys* are often packaged rather invitingly. Not awkward and taciturn like Mr Darcy, not tired and disappointed like Colonel Brandon, not serious and devout like Edmund Bertram nor caustic and superior like Henry Tilney, not ordinary and modest like Edward Ferrars nor old-fashioned and brusque like Mr Knightley nor weather-beaten and strident like Captain Wentworth, *guys* are smooth-talking like Mr Wickham, groomed and at ease like Henry Crawford, dashing and impetuous like Mr Willoughby, good humoured and care-free like our very own Frank Churchill. But, though charm and good looks, smooth talk and good humour may be all very well at first, they do little in the end to sweeten the man for whom you must always play mother.

But what does all of this matter?, you may ask. Will it count for anything when our eyes meet across a crowded room? When thunder sounds and lightning strikes? When our heart misses a beat? 'You can't always help who you fall in love with,' as *The Rules* points out. Stupid and nonsense!, comes Jane Austen's reply. We should *meet* a man, not *fall* for one! None of Jane Austen's heroines *falls* in love. Elizabeth positively dislikes Mr Darcy at first; Marianne considers Colonel Brandon too old for romance; Emma looks upon Mr Knightley as a kind of uncle, Fanny upon Edmund as a much-loved brother; Elinor likes Edward but in a manner that strikes the romantic Marianne as insipid; Anne, though she may have fallen in love at nineteen, certainly does nothing so foolish at twenty-eight; and Catherine is so caught up in the fallings in love of the heroines of her favourite novels that she forgets altogether about doing the same herself and gives her hand to Henry Tilney in appropriately calm and collected style.

But there is wincing; there are sighs: such an *unromantic* account of romance! Then, why have Jane Austen's novels been read with such persistence for over two-hundred years? Why have the tales she told left us with some of our most enduring romantic pairs? Because romance is best served with a dollop of *reason*: that is why. Not too much, of course, or the main dish is somewhat dry. Charlotte Lucas's decision to marry the odious Mr Collins, on the principle that enough of love will follow *after* they are married, is one to send a shudder down every woman's spine, including her author's. But Charlotte, by her own admission, 'is not romantic, you know.' We, by contrast, are. But we are not *children*, reaching wilfully for the thing that *looks* the sweetest. We are rational beings, as well as romantic ones. We have the right to choose. We should exercise it.

It is sometimes said of a woman, that she will 'make a man of him.' Even Mr Knightley seems to think it possible, during the heady first days of his own engagement to Emma, declaring himself ready to believe that Frank Churchill's character 'will improve, and acqui-

from Jane Fairfax's the steadiness and delicacy of principle that it wants.' Do not believe in Mr Knightley! Lydia will not make a man of her Wickham, nor Miss Grey of her Willoughby, nor even Jane Fairfax of her smiling Frank Churchill. Boys may very well grow into men, but *guys* never ever do!



*But must we really listen to the likes of Mrs Bennet and Mrs Jennings, in all their incessant triviality?!*

## LISTEN TO *WHAT THEY SAY*

*Pride and Prejudice* begins with one of the most famous lines in English literature: ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a young man in possession of a large fortune must be in want of a wife.’ The line is intended ironically, of course. That the earth orbits the sun is a truth universally acknowledged; that a young man in possession of a large fortune must be in want of a wife is no more than *what they say*. And yet, *is* the young man with a large fortune, in this case, in want of a wife? Indeed, he is. Mr Charles Bingley, young, rich and (a bonus) handsome, sets his sights on Jane Bennet almost as soon as he sets foot in the neighbourhood. That a young man in possession of a large fortune must be in want of a wife is, in this case, at least, a truth as worthy of universal acknowledgment as that the earth goes round and round the sun. It seems that *they* know a thing or two after all!

Given which, it may be surprising that *they* include Mrs Bennet, a woman whose merits do not comprise any wonderful intellectual acuity. Yet Mrs Bennet is *Pride and Prejudice*’s greatest champion of the truth about young men with large fortunes, and is shown thereby to possess a kind of *wisdom* which her well-educated husband is utterly without. Oh, Mr Bennet is clever enough to make great sport of his wife, declaring at one point that he hesitates to send Mrs Bennet to visit Mr Bingley on the grounds that his universally acknowledged want of a wife might lead Mr Bingley to make an offer to Mrs Bennet herself! – Very amusing, to be sure. But, for all his wit, Mr Bennet has none of that common sense with which his wife is equipped and which he regards as foolish to the extent that he regards it at all.

In the end, of course, it is Mr Bennet who is found to be foolish, for not paying heed to *what they say*, when they say that a young man in possession of a large fortune must be in want of a wife, a truth that Mr Bennet ought indeed to have acknowledged with enthusiasm on account of his having never bothered to make the kind of financial provision for his wife and daughters that might have made young men with large fortunes a matter of indifference to them all.

If there is one thing remarkable about Mr Bennet, it is that he seems always to have his head stuck in a book, always to be found in his library, from which hallowed ground the Bennet females are, for the most part, banished. The nuggets of wisdom that *they say*, therefore, are clearly not to be derived from the study of books. Indeed, insofar as *they* include Mrs Bennet – a woman, we can presume, who has never opened a volume in her life! – it is certain that *what they say* is to be learned by some means other than by reading. More than this – that burying your head in a book might rather prevent you from hearing *what they say* than anything else! For, *what they say* is to be gleaned simply by opening your ears, and listening out for those truths that bear repeating, time and again.

*The Rules* describes its rules as ‘time-tested secrets for capturing the heart of Mr Right.’ But here is a contradiction in the very title of their publication. For, *time-tested* rules are never

secret; they are rather universally acknowledged. In fact, whether or not they continue to be universally acknowledged, whether or not they continue to bear repeating, is the very test to which time subjects them. In other words, if a rule has stood the test of time, it has done so not by being the kind of thing *they hide*, but rather by being the kind of thing *they say*.

To demonstrate, we need go no further than the biggest ‘secret’ to which *The Rules* claim to give us access: the ‘secret’ that a woman should be mysterious. Consider, if you will, all the ways in which this so-called ‘secret’ has been and continues to be the kind of thing *they say*: ‘Treat him mean and keep him keen’; ‘Keep him guessing’; ‘Hold something back’; ‘Tender yourself more dearly’; ‘Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder,’ and so on and so on, to such endless length that the notion that the mysterious rule is a ‘secret’ is made to seem utterly ridiculous. Secrets? Time-tested rules, the kind of things *they say*, are rather the sound-track to our lives, broadcast in stereo and often somewhat louder than we would wish for!

Certainly louder than Marianne Dashwood would wish for, as she struggles to drown out the sound of *what they say*, during her ill-advised courtship with Mr Willoughby. One day, having gone unaccompanied with Willoughby, to look around the house he expects to inherit, she is cautioned by her sister Elinor, who informs her of what she cannot herself be unaware of: that *they say* her behaviour is bound not to come to any good. ‘My dear Marianne,’ urges Elinor wisely, ‘as it has already exposed you to some very impertinent remarks, do you not now begin to doubt the discretion of your own conduct?’ ‘If the impertinent remarks of Mrs Jennings are to be the proof of impropriety in conduct, we are all offending every moment of our lives,’ is Marianne’s defiant reply. ‘I value not her censure any more than I should do her commendation.’ Foolish Marianne! The censure and commendation of Mrs Jennings are precisely what she should value, founded, as they are, upon that brand of wisdom that has withstood the test of time.

But must we really listen to the likes of Mrs Bennet and Mrs Jennings, in all their incessant triviality?! Indeed we must, says Jane Austen, and be glad to do so too! We have learnt not to look down upon the particular concerns of such women, of course, being nowadays so very modern, so very urbane. But it is precisely the particularity of their concerns that gives Mrs Bennet and Mrs Jennings that intimacy with time-tested truths which all the libraries in the world are not able to furnish. For, their field of study is human nature, and there is no better way to learn of human nature than by thinking *and talking* of human beings. Mrs Bennet and Mrs Jennings are none other than the ‘chatterbox mother’ and ‘gossipy next-door neighbour’ of which *The Rules* speaks so dismissively – but, though *The Rules’* authors tell us that a man does not wish to *date* them (What of that? Mrs Bennet and Mrs Jennings would neither of them dream of dating anyone!), Jane Austen tells us that a woman should certainly wish to *heed* them.

You see, not everything worth knowing is to be found between the covers of books; and not everything worth listening to is to be heard from the mouths of those who read them. On the contrary, there is a kind of knowledge that is to be had only by virtue of the ‘chatter’ and ‘gossip’ at which Mrs Bennet and Mrs Jennings are so adept. And, in the end, even the superior and studious Mr Bennet is forced to admit it. Having refused to pay heed to Elizabeth’s warning, that her sister Lydia’s wild behaviour is giving rise to the censure of ‘the world,’ Mr Bennet must come at last to accept that neither the censure nor the commendation

of 'the world' is to be taken lightly but is to be listened to as a pretty reliable guide in human affairs, which, if followed, would in this case have prevented the disgrace of Lydia's elopement and the sacrifice of a young girl's future. Remorseful, if only for a time, Mr Bennet compliments Elizabeth on having shown a 'greatness of mind' of which he had not been capable. And that is it in a nutshell: women – especially women as inquiring and impertinent as Mrs Bennet and Mrs Jennings – tend to have the 'greatness of mind' that comes not from reading but from 'chatter,' not from study but from 'gossip'; it is certainly worth listening to *what they say*.

Are books like *The Rules* utterly redundant, then? Ought we to put them down entirely, and stride forth in search of the nearest Mrs Jennings? Are novels themselves to be abandoned? offering, as they do, those insights into human nature that a Mrs Bennet might give us in the merest half an hour? Not necessarily. There can be no harm, after all, in transcribing *what they say*, much less in animating and illustrating *what they say* in the manner achieved so brilliantly by Jane Austen. Moreover, given that the conditions for 'chatter' and 'gossip' are on the wane in modern life, it may be that, far from there being harm in it, there is great good in the recording and publishing of *what they say*. But we ought to be clear that we are doing no more than that: no more than recording and publishing what are well-known, well-worn rules, no more than repeating once again what are universally acknowledged truths. One recent edition of *The Rules* calls itself *Not Your Mother's Rules*. But, if there is anything between its covers that is of use or of value, then it can only be because the 'secrets' it 'reveals' in fact *are* your mother's rules: just the kind of thing that your mother, or my mother, or Mrs Bennet, or Mrs Jennings would advise; in short, just the kind of thing *they say*.

It is to be expected, of course, that *they* will sometimes get it wrong. Perhaps nobody knows this better than poor Anne Elliot, who, by the time we meet her, has already sacrificed eight years of happiness on account of having listened to *what they say*. *They say* that a young man *not* in possession of *any* fortune must *wait* for a wife until he can earn a decent living, and so nineteen-year-old Anne relinquished her engagement to the penniless Captain Wentworth. How bitterly Anne regretted having listened to *what they say*, we can only imagine, as, within two short years, *she* lost her bloom while *he* won his fortune. All we are told is how loudly she now feels she could speak out, in favour of the 'cheerful confidence' of youth and against the 'over-anxious caution' of the world. What Anne Elliot learned the hard way is that you should *listen to* what they say, not necessarily *do* what they say.

But that is not all that Anne Elliot learns. For, late in the novel, she discovers that she would not, after all, speak out quite so loudly against the 'over-anxious caution' of the world. It is late one morning, in the Musgroves' lodgings in Bath. Mrs Musgrove and Mrs Croft are talking together 'just in that inconvenient tone of voice,' we are told, 'which was perfectly audible while it pretended to be a whisper.' It might be Mrs Bennet and Mrs Jennings in the room, for all the 'chatter' and the 'gossip' that Anne is forced to hear! But just then, from the clamour of 'undesirable particulars,' emerges a nugget of the wisdom that no philosophical treatise would easily afford. The topic is the upcoming nuptials of Henrietta Musgrove and Charles Hayter:

'And so,' says Mrs Musgrove, 'we thought they had better marry at once, and make the best of it. At any rate, it will be better than a long engagement.'

‘That is precisely what I was going to observe,’ replies Mrs Croft, ‘I would rather have young people settle on a small income at once than be involved in a long engagement.’

‘Oh! dear Mrs Croft!’ cries Mrs Musgrove, ‘there is nothing I so abominate for young people as a long engagement.’

‘Yes, dear ma’am,’ returns Mrs Croft, ‘or an uncertain engagement, an engagement which may be long.’

And so on and so on go Mrs Musgrove and Mrs Croft, continuing ‘to re-urge the same admitted truths.’

But Anne has heard enough, enough to realize that when *they say* that a young man *not* in possession of *any* fortune must *wait* for a wife until he can earn a decent living, then *that* ought not to be simply disregarded. For, *as they also say*, there is nothing worse than the kind of long and uncertain engagement that Anne was most likely set to endure had she not broken with Captain Wentworth when she did. Anne Elliot is a great enthusiast for reading, but only by overhearing ‘admitted truths,’ bandied about in audible whispers between Mrs Musgrove and Mrs Croft, does she learn that her eight lonely years were not entered into unwisely.

Anne hears nothing further of the conversation on long engagements. Not very distinctly, at least. ‘It was,’ as we are told, ‘only a buzz of words in her ear.’ But how important the *buzz* of Mrs Musgrove and Mrs Croft! How crucial the *chatter* of Mrs Bennet and Mrs Jennings! How essential this chorus of women, with its ‘inconvenient tone’ and its ‘undesirable particulars,’ giving us insights into life and love that are to be had from nowhere else! How great indeed *what they say!*

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the course of true love never did run smooth. So, it is a course on which you need all of the help you can get. Then do not defy ‘the world’ without a thought. Do not close your ears to *what they say*.



*Women are not uni-form, but multi-form ...*



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