

Triumph for young filmmakers

THE YOUNG FILMMAKERS CONTEST, conducted by the JASNA-Southwest Region and now in its fourth year, is the world's first short film competition focused on the life, works and characters of Jane Austen. The 2020 winners represent diverse backgrounds and geographic areas across North America.

"We were delighted by the strong response and by the creativity and diversity of this year's participants, including their wide range of film styles and storytelling approaches," said Susan

L Wampler, JASNA-Southwest's regional coordinator and founder of the contest.

Entries are accepted in two categories: filmmakers under 20 years of age and those over 20. Taking first place for the 2020 contest in the under-20 category was Thomas Fitzgerald, whose *Handsome, Clever and Rich* follows a contemporary young woman whose life begins to mirror Emma Woodhouse's in both expected and unexpected ways. In the over-20 category the filmmaking duo Jillian Davis and Yolanda Rodriguez presented *Jane*

Austen Virtual Book Club, a spirited anachronistic Zoom event in which characters from various Austen novels discuss the merits of a particular love story. Meticulous in production detail,

Jane Austen Virtual Book Club, by Jillian Davis and Yolanda Rodriguez, winners of the over-20 category



the short film's clever nod to modern book clubs and pandemic restrictions earned it a first-place award.

The Young Filmmakers Contest began as a modest programme enhancement for JASNA's 2017 Annual General Meeting in Huntington Beach, California. While planning the event, members of the Southwest Region pondered ways to encourage more young people to appreciate Jane Austen and become involved with JASNA. What could be done to augment the Essay Contest, a long and successful tradition of honouring young writers, while embracing the exciting cinematic legacy of Los Angeles and entertaining members? The answer was simple: a short film contest for students.

The first one came together handily as the AGM committee put the finishing touches on its "Jane Austen in Paradise: Intimations of Immortality" programme, which included a screening of Whit Stillman's film *Love and Friendship*, based on *Lady Susan*, and a Q&A with the filmmaker. The inaugural contest's winning film, *An Accomplished Woman* by Rivka Penarelli, was screened before Stillman's talk and the winners had the opportunity to meet Stillman that evening.

Gratified by its successful launch, the contest organisers vowed to continue. Under the leadership of Erika Kotite, a Southwest Region board member and JASNA VP of Publications, eligibility for the 2020 contest was expanded to include non-students up to 30 years of age. Efforts to widen its reach continue. The Southwest Region hosted a "world premiere" virtual event in January this year to introduce the winners, followed by a Q&A with the winners and judges, and the official launch of the 2021 contest.

Adding significance to the most recent contest was that last year marked the 25th anniversary of several screen adaptations that attracted new devotees to Jane Austen. These 1995-released adaptations included *Sense & Sensibility*, for which Emma Thompson won an Academy Award for adapted screenplay, Andrew Davies's mini-series adaptation of *Pride & Prejudice* with Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle, and *Persuasion* with Amanda Root and Ciarán Hinds.

However, it was a quirky little 1995 film called *Clueless* that arguably created its own generation of young Austen acolytes.

Written by Amy Heckerling and starring Alicia Silverstone as Cher, the film overlaid plot points in *Emma* on to the story of a contemporary heroine living in Beverly Hills. Cher's seeming "cluelessness" gets her into trouble because, you know, habitual matchmaking never turns out the way you would wish.

The judging panel for the 2020 contest included respected names in the film and literary worlds: the screenwriter/director Robin Swicord (*The Jane Austen Book Club* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*); Kenneth Turan, the retired *Los Angeles Times* film critic; the actress/writer Ashley Clements (star of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*); the actress/writer Aydreya Walden (*Black Girl in a Big Dress*); the novelist Laurie Viera Rigler (*Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict*); and the Emmy-winning executive producer and director Thomas Rigler.

Undoubtedly the calibre of judges contributed to the success of the 2020 contest. Dare we call it a festival? Perhaps not yet, but soon. Deadline for entries for the 2021 contest is October 1. For more information, visit jasnasw.com/young-filmmakers-contest. The website also includes a link to the region's YouTube channel where all the winning entries can be seen. ¶¶

2020 winners

Under-20:

1. Thomas Fitzgerald, 16, of Warwick, Rhode Island, for *Handsome, Clever and Rich*
2. Ellie Cagle, 17, of Lebanon, Tennessee, for *A Certain Step Towards Falling in Love*
3. Sajween Khan, 18, of Irving, Texas, for *Letters to Cassandra*

Over-20:

1. Jillian Davis, 27, of North Hollywood, California, and Yolanda Rodriguez, 29, of South Pasadena, California, for *Jane Austen Virtual Book Club*
2. Lydia Smith, 26, West Sacramento, California, for *A Letter to Jane*
3. Courtney Birnbaum, 29, of Burbank, California, for *Morland & Mishaps*