



Jane Austen Society of North America, Southwest Region

February 2017 Newsletter



Interview with Robert Rodi

author of *Edgar and Emma*

Robert Rodi's eagerly anticipated new novel, *Edgar and Emma*, is his first Austen-inspired fiction. A longtime Austen devotee, he previously published the *Bitch in a Bonnet* blog and book series with his irreverent and insightful takes on Austen's six novels. He was our guest speaker at the Fall 2016 meeting in Pasadena and graciously agreed to share his approach to transforming a short piece from Austen's Juvenilia into a full-length comedy of manners.

What inspired you to write an Austen-related novel?

I spent many years working on *Bitch In a Bonnet* – first as a blog, then editing and collecting it for publication – and once that project was finally completed, I felt both a sense of accomplishment and a sense of relief. I thought, "I can live in the real world again, instead of Austen-land!" But then I found that I missed Austen-land, and started scheming a way to get back there.

I didn't want to do any more literary analysis, because I'd already exhaustively said my piece there; and I liked the idea of doing a novel. I came to see it as a natural follow-up; after

all, I'd gone to such lengths to argue that Austen was a satirist and an ironist rather than a romantic. Writing a novel in what I see as the Austen style would be the illustration of that argument. It would also be tremendous fun.

What led you to the Juvenilia, and Edgar and Emma in particular?

The Juvenilia is so wildly, brazenly funny -- so over-the-top and shameless. I unabashedly love it. And no one else had really done it before; people have done prequels and sequels to the major works in the canon, or written their own conclusions to the unfinished novels, so I wouldn't be doing anything new there. And I wanted to break new ground. As for *Edgar and Emma* in particular, I just saw certain opportunities in it -- the way, for instance, that at one point Austen has Emma telling her troubles to "Tom," with no indication of who Tom is, and no subsequent mention of him anywhere in the text. Tom was thus mine to flesh out, in any way I saw fit. Who could resist?

What was the most challenging aspect of turning the four-page story into a full-length comedy of manners?

Austen's story really comprises just two very short set pieces; so extending them into an actual novel meant building an entire narrative world around them. It was a little different from the way I usually write a novel, which is fairly linearly, starting with my characters and an idea of what I want to happen to them, and then leading them through it. Here I was sort of inventing sideways, out of these incidents that already existed.

There was also the matter of having to tone down the wonderful absurdity of Austen's story. I mean, she gives Mr. and Mrs. Willmot about 24 children -- which is achingly funny when Mrs. Willmot is giving the inventory of their current whereabouts, because you have no idea, and the names just keep coming. "Amy is with my sister Clayton. Sam at Eton. David with his Uncle John. Jem and Will at Winchester. Kitty at Queen's Square. Ned with his Grandmother. Hetty and Patty in a convent at Brussels." You're just dying by the end of it. But alas it would strain credulity in a literary novel; so I whittled down the Willmot offspring to just nine -- which is still considerable.

There were a few other similarly zany details that I had to modify for the sake of credulity. Though not the story's conclusion, in which a heartbroken Emma runs up to her room, where she "continued in tears the remainder of her Life." Rather than alter that, I decided to keep it as is and turn it into a running joke: Emma is always tearfully shutting herself up in her room for the remainder of her life. She's been known to do it two or three times a season.

How difficult did you find it approximating Austen's style?

It was as natural as breathing. I've always had an affinity for what I call Regency-speak. It's what I love best about Austen: the simple elegance -- the bell-like plangency -- of her writing. There are a few simple rules I followed, like avoiding gerunds unless absolutely necessary; that's a jarringly modern usage, to my ears. (An Austen character never says, "Am I interrupting you?" She says, "Do I interrupt you?") And then there's that wonderful British habit of answering in the affirmative by use of a negative: "I am not unmindful" instead of "I'm well aware." Oh, I loved writing in Austen's style. I can't wait to do it again.

What are you working on next?

Right now I'm wrapping up the second volume in my Young Adult science-fiction series, *Parallel U.*, which is about a university where all the students are from parallel universes. *Freshman Year* came out in 2014; *Sophomore Year* should be out in a few months. It's published under a pseudonym, Dakota Rusk. I'm very fond of this series and have high hopes for it.

But I'd love to follow that with another Austen Juvenilia adaptation. If *Edgar and Emma* sells respectably, I've got some killer ideas for *Frederic and Elfrida*.

For more information, visit robertrodi.com or check out the reviews at Good Reads.



2017 AGM Update

Plans for the 2017 Annual General Meeting hosted by our region in Huntington Beach, California, October 6-8, are well underway. We received nearly 100 breakout session proposals and will be offering 42 such sessions to give you a wealth of options. Watch this space for details. In the meantime, here's a preview of one of our post-conference tours.

JASNA-Southwest will be offering a memorable post-conference excursion to San Diego and San Juan Capistrano on Monday, October 9.



Ships, sailing and the nautical life wove a rich tapestry through Austen's life and her novels. We thought it fitting to offer docent-led tours of the authentic Austen-era ship *Surprise* (replica of a British Navy frigate used in the film *Master and Commander*), the mid-1800s sailing ship *Star of India* and the *San Salvador*, a historically accurate replica of Cabrillo's Spanish galleon that he sailed into San Diego harbor in 1542. The [Maritime Museum Regency Dancers](#) will perform for us on the deck of one of the ships.

The day will feature a stop at the spectacular [Cabrillo National Monument](#), with shaded and sunny places to picnic. The tour also will include a docent-led visit to the [San Juan Capistrano Mission](#) and a wine tasting. Check out our [Jane 'Seas' San Diego Pinterest board](#).

Reading Groups



The West Los Angeles Reading Group's annual toast to Jane Austen in December, led by Professor Lynn Batten

Saturday, February 18, 11:30 a.m.

Ventura Reading Group

Growing Older with Jane Austen by Maggie Lane

Location: TBD

For more information, contact [Linda Terry](#), 805-302-0855.

Saturday, February 18

Westside/405 Reading Group

Victoria by Daisy Goodwin

For more information, contact [Karen Berk](#), 310-477-6753.

Sunday, February 19, 1:30-4:30 p.m.

West Los Angeles Reading Group

Nutshell by Ian McEwan

Discussion leader: Dr. Charles Lynn Batten

This group is at capacity and cannot accept new members. Current members may contact [Clara Browda](#), 310-278-8759.

Sunday, February 26, 2-4 p.m.

Riverside Reading Group

First Congregationalist Church

3504 Mission Inn Ave., Riverside

Emma: A Modern Retelling by Alexander McCall Smith

For more information, contact [Cristi Hendry](#).

Sunday, March 5, 5 p.m.

Santa Monica Reading Group

Child of Light: Mary Shelley by Muriel Spark

Location: home of Deanna Bradshaw

For more information, contact [Diana Birchall](#), 310-394-2196.

Sunday, March 12, 2-4 p.m.

South Bay Reading Group

Wives and Daughters by Elizabeth Gaskell

New and returning members are welcome.

For more information, contact [Jeanine Holguin](#), 805-444-8999.

Saturday, April 15, 11 a.m.-2 p.m.

San Gabriel Valley Reading Group

Matters of Fact in Jane Austen by Janine Barchas

Location: home of Alison Standley, Claremont

For more information, contact [Kelly Duir](#), 909-967-6630.

San Diego Region

Although San Diego is a separate JASNA region, many JASNA-Southwest members are interested in San Diego JASNA events and vice versa. For information on upcoming San Diego JASNA meetings, contact [Jeanne Talbot](#), 808-342-0666.

Jane Austen in the News

In recognition of the 200th anniversary of Jane Austen's death, the United Kingdom is releasing a two-pound Jane Austen coin this July, in addition to the five-pound note that will bear her likeness.

[Learn more.](#)



Save the Date!

April 22-23, 2017

Los Angeles Times
Festival of Books

[Learn more.](#)