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WOMEN WHO WOW! Florence Welch, Jessica Alba, Charlotte Tilbury, Dakota Johnson, Isabel Marant, Rashida Jones, Tina Fey, Rachel Feinstein, Salma Hayek, Gloria Vanderbilt



BOOKS

back to the FUTURE

Bestselling American author CURTIS SITTENFELD's modern retelling of *Pride and Prejudice* is equal parts homage to JANE AUSTEN and a commentary on the 21st-century dilemma of being a woman. Fellow author and social observer SLOANE CROSLLEY considers what Austen can still teach us

*It is ironic that most of Jane Austen's novels are about remaining true to oneself, and yet they are so frequently turned into something else. None more so, or with more variation (action figures, anyone?), than *Pride and Prejudice*. There are seemingly endless incarnations of Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, the best being in a six-hour BBC miniseries. There's also a two-part American PBS series, a 1940 film, a 2005 film, the recent release of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (a testament to Austen's plot is that just about any genre can be grafted onto it), a British TV series called *Lost in Austen* (which*

the sum of its parts. *Eligible* is not just a literary parlor trick—it's an important tribute to Austen's relevance. She still has so much to teach us about dating, marriage, procreation pressure, careers, friendship, love, deceit, family, money and just about every other topic Oprah and Adele have ever articulated on our behalf.

In *Eligible*, the gender lopsidedness is more biological than social (Mrs Bennet presses the panic button because her daughters are pushing 40, not 25), but it's as alive and well as it was in Austen's era. Chillingly, this is brought further into focus when Liz cheekily explains to Darcy,

you probably have not seen) and a movie called *Bridget Jones's Diary* (which you definitely have). And those are just the screen versions. But should you still require affirmation that *Pride and Prejudice's* truths are not merely universally acknowledged but timelessly so, this month marks the release of bestselling American author Curtis Sittenfeld's *Eligible*.

Eligible, Sittenfeld's fifth novel, is billed as "a modern retelling of *Pride and Prejudice*". The majority of the narrative takes place in Cincinnati, Ohio, where Chip Bingley has just arrived, fresh off a fruitless stint on a *Bachelor*-like reality show. Nearby, Mr Bennet's sudden illness acts as an excuse to summon Jane and Liz back to the Midwest from their lives in New York (as a yoga instructor and magazine writer, respectively), to rejoin Kitty, Lydia and Mary (who is getting her master's degree). It is all part of Sittenfeld's knack for problem-solving: how to get five adult sisters under one roof and sleeping in twin beds in 21st-century America? How to create plausible long-term misunderstandings in the age of Instagram and Wikipedia?

Sittenfeld pulls off the modernization splendidly. The Bennet women play sports in lieu of the pianoforte, Kitty and Lydia have embraced Crossfit, Mr Bennet is a lovable Republican who eschews Obamacare, Mrs Bennet is a hoarder who specializes in aspirational homewares, Darcy is a neurosurgeon, Cousin Willie is a tone-deaf Silicon Valley scion and Liz locates the Pemberley estate, the venue for a 4th of July barbecue, via—how else?—Google Maps. As the novel's parallels pile up, the whole becomes marvelously more meaningful than

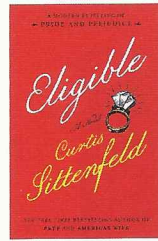
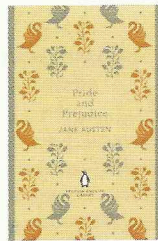
"You can stand on a street corner, announce you want a wife and be engaged 15 minutes later." Any woman who has lived and dated in a major city will be familiar with this unpleasant post-breakup thought. Liz also keeps a list on her laptop of promising semi-declarations of affection from a reincarnation of George Wickham, the charming manipulator, now named Jasper. Then, when the real thing (Darcy) comes along, his purity of motivation highlights the shame she feels over having almost fallen for the shallow Jasper. How could *the* Liz Bennet, this otherwise intelligent, beautiful, forceful, opinionated, accomplished woman, have put up with deceit and half-promises just because they emanated from Jasper's pretty face? As a writer, I know that the fictional cad at the heart of my own novel owes a debt to Austen's perfect portrayal of the type.

Happily, the deeper underpinnings of *Pride and Prejudice* are also alive and well in *Eligible*, and brimming with feminist life lessons. For instance, when a relationship disintegrates, both parties bear the burden of responsibility. This is one of Austen's essential lessons throughout all of her fiction – despite shifting difficulties and pressures, women are responsible for their own decisions, their own actions and their own happiness. But with great empowerment comes great accountability – and when it comes to female friendship, Austen's message is more germane than ever. Because so many modern women have the great luck to not be married at 20, they also have the time to create a family made of friends. If Austen's position was "Love your female friends as you would your sisters", it's even more applicable now.

With each subsequent version of *Pride and Prejudice*, I feel a gut-level sense of relief when Elizabeth and Darcy get together (and they do in *Eligible*, but it's worth the price of admission to read Sittenfeld's fresh spin on how). Reading this classic story anew, set against a relentlessly recognizable background, I realized for the first time that my relief is actually happening in the negative. I'm not so much glad that our hero and heroine have married each other as I am glad that they didn't cave and marry the wrong people. *Eligible* demonstrates how the modern woman is not immune to social pressures. But it also shows that when it comes to relationships, Austen has always known best: the only way to find the right someone else (or to even decide that you want to) is to remain true to yourself. And we have Sittenfeld to thank for escorting us to that age-old truth in a brand-new carriage.

Eligible by Curtis Sittenfeld (Random House, £20) is published on April 19. *The Clasp* by Sloane Crosley (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, £13) is out now

"I feel a gut-level sense of relief when Elizabeth and Darcy get together"



NOW AND THEN
Curtis Sittenfeld is the latest author to update Austen's classic

The first website you go to in the morning?
Instagram and Net-A-Porter, which is an obsession. My husband [actor Joe Manganiello] will catch me looking at dresses and say: "Enough! Talk to me!"

Where would you ban phones?
I banned them at my wedding because I wanted everyone to relax. It turned out to be the best idea.

Is there anyone you 'follow' who you're completely hooked on?
I follow people who make desserts – a lot of them. Joe thinks I'm insane – he'll look over my shoulder and see me watching someone making a cake and say: "You know you're sick, right?" But I also follow Zuhair Murad and Tom Ford and a lot of the big designers, they really help you know how to make an outfit work.

What would be your dream app?
One that blows up the letters into a bigger font so that I don't have to wear glasses to read – it's a whole new problem with aging.

What makes you 'unfollow'?
Anything that is making people feel bad. It's unnecessary. If you have nothing good to say, why feel the need to say anything at all?



PORTER plugs in...
SOFIA VERGARA
The Colombian siren and star of Modern Family is shaking up Hollywood as the highest paid actress on TV with over 7 million Instagram followers. Here she reveals her digital dos and don'ts...

What's your worst digital trait?
I'm not that great with technology. I read my emails and I know how to take pictures because I do my own social media, but that's about all.

What time of day do you go online?
In between scenes on *Modern Family*, while they're doing the lighting, that's when I get to shop!

The emoticon that best describes you?
I always use the dancing woman in the red dress.

Kindle or book?
I tried a Kindle and it didn't feel the same. Reading has been one of my biggest pastimes in life and there's just nothing like a book.

As told to Celia Walden