

Reimagining Mr. Darcy

What Would Mr. Darcy Do?

By Abigail Reynolds.
Sourcebooks Landmark, 2011.
227 pages. Paperback. \$12.99.

Mr. Darcy and the Secret of Becoming a Gentleman

By Maria Hamilton.
Sourcebooks Landmark, 2011.
446 pages. Paperback. \$14.99.

The Truth About Mr. Darcy

By Susan Adriani.
Sourcebooks Landmark, 2011.
438 pages. Paperback. \$14.99.

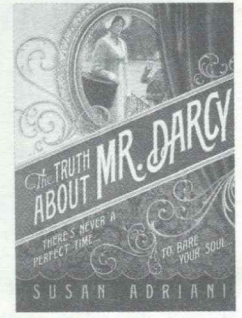
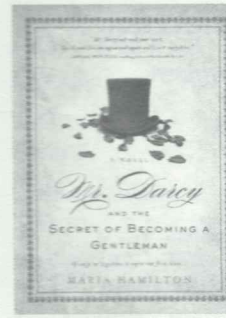
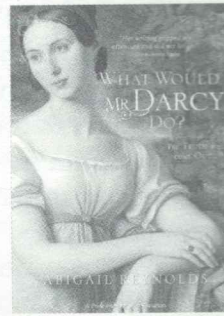
Review by Claire Denelle Cowart.

The three new novels in this review select key points within Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and then develop alternative versions of the original novel, although all lead to the eventual marriage of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet. Within their pages, these altered storylines include access to Mr. Darcy's private thoughts. In addition to the fuller development of Darcy's point of view, the three novels also explore the sexual attraction between Darcy and Elizabeth. The premise that Austen's Darcy is a passionate man beneath his carefully controlled exterior is reasonable, but the degree to which this affects his behavior is interpreted differently by the three authors.

In her series of *Pride and Prejudice* variations, Abigail Reynolds has been exploring "roads not taken" in Austen's original novel. The latest in this series, *What Would Mr. Darcy Do?*, begins shortly after Elizabeth Bennet has visited Darcy's estate of Pemberley with her aunt and uncle Gardiner. In this version Mr. Darcy, encouraged by Elizabeth's more

positive attitude towards him, does not leave her in the inn at Lambton after she tells him that her sister Lydia has run off with Mr. Wickham. Instead, he stays to comfort Elizabeth, ends up kissing her, and is discovered in this embrace by Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. With his feelings revealed, Darcy sets out to win over Elizabeth, who despite their mutual attraction remains reluctant to accept his proposal. In making her change fairly late in Austen's story, after Darcy and Elizabeth have begun to revise their opinions of each other, Reynolds is able to stay true to the original characters and core deeply into their resulting relationship. She also keeps the action faithful to the social behaviors of the time period. Although Darcy and Elizabeth begin their courtship by letter, they are careful to conceal their missives in Georgiana's correspondence with Elizabeth. Later, Georgiana pays an extended visit to the Bennets' home and forms a bond with Kitty and Mary, adding a light, playful touch to the novel. Once Darcy returns to Hertfordshire his relationship with Elizabeth becomes more physical, and the couple seem in danger of anticipating their vows, but Reynolds has Darcy quite believably remember propriety and exert his self-control until after the couple is married. The penultimate scene of their wedding night is described with an appropriate balance of sexuality and good taste.

In *Mr. Darcy and the Secret of Becoming a Gentleman*, by Maria Hamilton, the action begins earlier than in Reynolds' books, as Darcy is leaving Rosings after his first proposal to Elizabeth and is feeling tormented by her critique of his "ungentlemanlike" behavior. Hamilton's alteration to Austen's plot involves Darcy's revealing all to Bingley, who surprisingly fears rejection by Jane and refuses to return to Netherfield. When Darcy takes it upon himself to go back



and try to put things right with Jane, his intentions are amusingly misinterpreted by Mr. and Mrs. Bennet; Hamilton's comic timing and dialogue make the novel quite readable. Jane, of course, forgives Darcy quickly and advances his suit with Elizabeth, but he must work hard to undo Elizabeth's previous judgment. Hamilton's Darcy is sensitive and determined, but also passionate and open once Elizabeth accepts him.

The Truth About Mr. Darcy begins with Darcy having an erotic dream about Elizabeth Bennet, which sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Susan Adriani's Darcy proposes much earlier than in the other novels and seems obsessed with possessing Elizabeth. Elizabeth is portrayed as a partner who is initially hesitant but willing, and well before their wedding night the couple engage in repeated sexual encounters in a variety of locations, most shockingly during a ball at the London home of Darcy's uncle. Their lack of discretion results in Georgiana, Mr. Bennet, and the servants at Darcy's London home becoming aware of their activities. Adriani is a capable writer, but in pushing the boundaries of Austen's novel, she has entered foreign territory. Her version of Mr. Darcy is more Regency Rake than Austenian hero. Darcy frequently refers to Elizabeth as the future mistress of Pemberley, but the balance and judgment represented by Pemberley are missing both from the setting and from his character in this novel. His behavior is controlling, jealous, and demanding. Jane Austen would be hard put to recognize the characters she created in Adriani's book.

Claire Denelle Cowart, an Assistant Professor at Southeastern Louisiana University, teaches courses on Jane Austen's fiction, "Jane Austen and Film," "British and Irish Literature," and "Detective Fiction." She is on the Board of Directors of the Jane Austen Festival held in Mandeville, LA, each March.