Lesley Jørgensen. *Cat and Fiddle* (Scribe, 2013)

It’s a slightly risky venture, playing with the classics. Writing sequels is probably the most perilous of all, but even what Lesley Jørgensen does in *Cat and Fiddle* can founder. However, she steers confidently among the jagged rocks of pastiche and the hidden currents of slavish imitation, and brings her novel safely into the lively port of romantic comedy with a firm hand on the tiller of satire and affectionate parody.

The novel brings together two families, in keeping with the tradition of the great classics of fiction. The Bournes are English landed gentry, slowly clawing their way back to prosperity with the help of the National Trust and a strategic marriage to a Greek heiress. The Choudhurys are Bangladeshi immigrants who represent an intriguing combination of Western education and Muslim traditions, the parents as well as the children straddling, sometimes in unexpected ways, the often uncomfortable divide between the beliefs and values that make them who they are, and the pressures to become more like their British compatriots.

The classic to which this novel most clearly alludes is *Pride and Prejudice*, and in its bicentenary year this link will be given prominence in the marketing. It is not the only Austen novel which surfaces, often in the tiniest hints, but it is the most fundamental to the novel’s structure. Thus we have a rich, upper class man (Richard Bourne) attracted to an intelligent woman outside his usual circle (Rohimun Choudhury), who initially despises him, and who has a mother keen on getting all her children safely married. There is a slightly disreputable younger sister (Shunduri) – but only one, and also an older brother (Tariq) with his own very modern set of problems. The parents’ marriage provides another parallel, but none of these similarities are straightforward. Mrs Begum, despite her obsession with matrimony, is no Mrs Bennet: when Austen writes that Elizabeth’s mother is ‘occasionally nervous, and invariably silly’, it is the omniscient narrator speaking. When Jørgensen writes that Mrs Begum is ‘incessantly active and occasionally silly’ (377), however, this is not only a less harsh judgement, but it is her husband, Dr Choudhury, who makes it, and it is compromised by the reader’s understanding that Dr Choudhury is, despite his belief to the contrary, not actually in a position to take the high moral or intellectual ground in his marriage. He is vain and obtuse about many things, and, despite his academic achievements, is unaware how skilfully his wife manages him.

I would suggest that pursuing the parallels between the plots of the two novels is a diversion best avoided. *Cat and Fiddle* can stand very well on its own without needing to borrow the lustre of its forbear, and I found that speculating on which character in *Pride and Prejudice* equates to Tariq, or where Richard’s brother Henry and his wife might slot into Austen’s story, only distracted me from my absorption in this very engrossing novel. Jørgensen’s narrator is often witty, but the multiplicity of narrative points of view is another point of difference from Austen. Austen pioneered free indirect discourse, as we know, but still had no qualms about acting as the omniscient narrator when it suited her, in a way that few twentieth- or twenty-first-century novelists would regard as quite proper. Jørgensen channels at least eight of her characters at different times, allowing us to see their failings and insecurities from the inside, which makes it more difficult for them to be mere objects of satire. Thus Dr Choudhury cannot help attributing the sidelining of historical architecture, his speciality at Oxford, to his professor’s disappointed hopes of romantic involvement with him: she is a woman, after all. But he is nevertheless a figure of real pathos, and his concerns about what is happening at Oxford are justified. The satire is sometimes less complicated.
When Shunduri’s boyfriend Kareem batters an opponent with his shoe in a street fight, and as he puts it back on, thinks ‘You certainly couldn’t do as much damage with some cheap Kays shoe. And forget trainers. These handmades had real weight in them. … Investment dressing was what it was all about’ (365).

There is also plenty of satire directed elsewhere. Mrs Begum, worried about her son’s reluctance to get married and his self-directed anger, decides that it would be ‘far better that he married and could direct all this anger against the EU and the French, like … everyone else in this village’ (369). The brittle lives of the fast set in London, the dealers in art as well as drugs, come under scrutiny, along with the Oxford dons over-impressed by Saudi money and the British royal family seen through the affectionate but sometimes critical eyes of Mrs Begum. The wit of the narrative doesn’t always depend on satire: Richard’s reaction to a Bangladeshi meal followed by betel-nut and tea involves a feeling ‘as if he had been run over by a steamroller and then somehow overinflated’ (314). Another source of delight is the subtle rendition of speech rhythms. Mrs Begum is always making someone ‘a cup-of-tea’, the hyphens signifying a change in word stress from ‘tea’, where it would fall in the more ‘standard’ version. The young people often end their sentences with ‘yeah’, so you can hear the déclassé Londoner in their voices, even when the rest of their speech is quite grammatically correct.

So read Cat and Fiddle for its own sake, not because it owes a debt to Jane Austen or any other forerunner. It’s a long novel – 500 pages – and it may take a little time to get you hooked, but once that happens you won’t want it to finish. I won’t give away the ending. Suffice to say that although things seem to be progressing satisfactorily for most of the main characters, all loose ends are not perfectly woven in. But then, neither were they for Austen’s characters, except in the most literal and unimaginative reading. For Jørgensen, as well as for Austen, ‘happy ever after’ is not only improbable, but less interesting and life-affirming than the provisional optimism on which she ends her novel.

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