

Helen Halstead’s first novel was a sequel to Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice.* *The Imaginary Gentleman* is very much in the same vein. Austen’s influence is everywhere in this novel, though her light touch and inimitable wit is missing.

Laura Morrison, unmarried and around 30, is visiting Lyme Regis with her vain, hypochondriac sister who refuses to leave their hotel room. She meets a handsome clergyman, Mr Templeton, who immediately disappears, leaving behind severe doubts among Laura’s family and friends that he has ever existed. Laura herself begins to doubt her own sanity. A rich baronet, cousin of Laura, gallantly offers himself as an antidote to her disgrace, and with the urging of her family she reluctantly accepts. But this is not the end of the matter, of course. A convoluted denouement follows, with dispossessed heirs, unscrupulous ostlers and vivacious countesses all playing their parts.

The Austen references are dropped into the otherwise stodgy prose like plums in a pudding, little rewards for the *aficionado.* But it rarely seems more than a rather laboured game, and the only thing which kept me reading was an irritable curiosity about how the improbable plot would be resolved. Austen had no need of such contrivances.