



Nick Prescott's Reviews

The Jane Austen Book Club

Talent: Amy Brenneman, Hugh Dancy, Maria Bello, Kathy Baker, Maggie Grace, Jimmy Smits, Emily Blunt.

Date of review: Thursday 31st January, 2008

Director: Robin Swicord

Duration: 105 minutes

Classification: M

We rate it: Three and a half stars.

It's been thirteen years since the public obsession with the works of Jane Austen was revived by the wonderful BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. Ms Austen's work has been well and truly put through the wringer since then, with some lovely adaptations and transformations coming along (like the delightful versions of *Emma* starring Gwynneth Paltrow and Kate Beckinsale) and some dreadful misfires too (witness 2005's *Pride and Prejudice* starring the woefully miscast Keira Knightley). Now we're seeing adaptations of books about people reading Jane Austen, and happily *The Jane Austen Book Club* fits in under the category of light, life-affirming and buoyant romantic drama.

The film, an adaptation of Karen Joy Fowler's book, follows the trials and tribulations of a group of American women (and one almost-token man) who decide to meet each month and discuss Austen's novels as a kind of antidote to the pressures of life, work and relationships. The central characters are an interesting collection of people from numerous different backgrounds and life predicaments: there's the early middle-aged woman reeling from the recent breakdown of her marriage, the young and beautiful French teacher whose own marriage seems to be in peril, the gay daughter searching for love in all the wrong places, and the been-there-done-that fifty-something woman whose idea it is to start the club in the first place. Then there's the aforementioned male reader, the handsome and somewhat nerdy fellow whose inclusion in the group causes all sorts of romantic ripples. The scene is set, as you can see, for some Austen-esque complications to ensue.

Robin Swicord, herself an accomplished screenwriter (she recently adapted *Memoirs of a Geisha* for the big screen) here directs with a gentle touch, and puts her cast through paces that are as charming as one would expect without being startling or especially remarkable. There are many pretty faces on display, with the luminous actresses Maggie Grace and Emily Blunt providing eye-candy for the guys, while Brit Hugh Dancy is on display for the ladies. This sounds perhaps a little more cynical

than it's meant to be: the cast is indeed attractive, but that's part of what romantic drama is all about. We also know that, for the most part, the romantic troubles that beset our characters will be more-or-less happily resolved by the film's end, and that too is part of the charm of this kind of filmic experience. The Jane Austen Book Club in a way provides the kind of comforting diversion that friendly book-groups do: we feel we're in the company of friends whose troubles, joys and everyday experiences can be shared and solved, and that we'll come out afterwards a little bit happier for the experience.

Nick Prescott.