



What Would Jane Cut?

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, when I was a student in the UCLA screenwriting program, I attended a special screening of *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, a movie based on the book by Brian Moore. Before the show, the screenwriter talked about the book—why he'd chosen it, how much he loved it. Afterwards I asked him why he'd so altered the ending. He said something to the effect of "I didn't want people going home and slitting their wrists." I'm pretty sure my question surprised him; I'm pretty sure he thought I should have been able to figure that out for myself. But this is what I actually figured out: fidelity to the book is not the goal of the screenwriter. The goal of the screenwriter is to tell the best story possible.

Of course, mileage varies as to the best story possible. I didn't much care for the new ending. Every book lover has her own list of disappointments. Books I love and movies I hate: *The Accidental Tourist*. *The English Patient*. *The Return of the King*. Certainly every Austen lover does. All I want in an Austen movie is perfect fidelity. Jane Bennet is supposed to be prettier than Elizabeth. Is she? Is Mr. Knightley much, much older than Emma, as written? Has Edward Ferrars been made sexier and more charming than he should be? I don't want a more romantic version. I don't want a happier ending. What I want is no monkeying about.

So when I heard there was to be a movie based on my own book, *The Jane Austen Book Club*, my feelings were more mixed than you might think. I've done a screenplay myself of my first novel, *Sarah Canary*; I know I'm not

an easy writer to adapt. My books tilt away from plot. They have twisty timelines and my characters think a great deal but seldom do much more than talk. *The Jane Austen Book Club* is episodic and has six main characters. My style depends on voice, and my voice is digressive. Novels are long and messy enough to contain digressions. Movies not so much.

By the time I learned there was to be a movie, the screenplay had long been completed. Robin Swicord was both the screenwriter and the director for the movie. I like it when the writer and director is the same person; I trust the vision of the writer more than any group-think. And I already knew Robin's work from her *Little Women* script, which I admired. So she'd already adapted a book I loved with results I loved. (I had an issue or two with the casting. Not her fault.)

I was cautiously optimistic. And curious to read the script, see how she'd solved the problems presented by my book.



One of Robin's first scenes involves a funeral for Jocelyn's dog. I recognized the dog's death as being from my book. In the book, Jocelyn, Sylvia, and Daniel go together to the vet to put the beloved dog down. This happens at the end of the first chapter, a chapter in which we've learned that Daniel is divorcing Sylvia. The story about the dog represents the connection they all once had, and underscores the fact that Sylvia's loss of Daniel is also Jocelyn's loss of Daniel and that Jocelyn's loss is significant. In the movie, the scene is comedic. Rather than representing a long ago moment of community, it's been moved into the present where it represents the opposite. Daniel is halfway out the door where his marriage is concerned, though we haven't learned that yet, and there is no suggestion that he cares deeply for Jocelyn or vice versa.

Throughout the script, wherever possible, Robin moved things from the past into the present. The characters' histories make up a large part of the book. Robin saved what she could of these. If she wasn't able to bring them into the present, they're cleverly alluded to in dialogue. In interviews Robin has said she wanted a story that took place in the here and now, and I'm sure this is true. I also suspect it made financial sense.

In the book, if you remove Bernadette's history, the character is left with little to do. I'm guessing this is why Robin gave her a larger role in the contemporary story. She, not Jocelyn, puts the book club together. She serves as a universal confidante and a somewhat bawdy reader of Austen. This is not exactly my disheveled, repetitive Bernadette, though her outlines are recognizable. But I liked Robin's character as I read her, and liked her even more as played by the brilliant Kathy Baker.

Robin unified the movie around the romances, particularly Jocelyn and Grigg's. She made the emotional content more overt—Jocelyn more vulnerable and less happily unmarried, Sylvia publicly wounded by her divorce instead of maintaining the Elinor Dashwood reserve of my character, and Prudie openly at odds with both her husband and mother as well as involved in a romance with a high school student. The book club meetings are fraught—the characters far more likely to read Austen through the lens of their current struggles, far more likely to leave the room in tears.

In general, I felt I understood why Robin had made the changes she'd made. I felt she'd done a good, creative job with a difficult book. I was only sorry to find that Grigg had become a wealthy man. Readers insist on seeing him as an Austen hero when I meant him to be an Austen heroine. I still like him best when he has no money, no connections, nothing that can tempt someone to marry him, beyond his own good heart and impeccable taste in books.



I first met Robin when she came up to Davis with a small crew to take a look at the places in which I'd set scenes. I took the day and drove with them around downtown Sacramento, out to Woodland to see Jocelyn's house, and back to Davis to see the high school and Sylvia's house (which is, in fact, my house). I liked them all enormously. Robin was smart and gracious, even as I sent her back to LA with her elegant black pants covered in dog hair.

She made no bones about the fact that she had her own ideas about Austen. She'd already been working on an original Austen-themed contemporary story. "I want Austen to be an antidote to our fractured, busy lives," she told me. So Grigg would not live in the Beatrix Potter cottage I'd given him, but in a sterile prefab condo complex instead, and the movie begins with a montage (which I love) of cell phones, parking tickets, and metal detectors. (My daughter traveled to China a few years ago and told me that they had metal detectors in the train stations, but that they were entirely optional. You could go through or you could choose to go around. [See what I just did there? I digressed.])

Robin also said that one of the themes of the movie was to be about letting go. I could not see this as a theme in my book—I'm much more the holding-on sort. My book is about the transitory nature of happy endings, about the effort it takes to sustain happiness, about the importance of making that effort even as you understand its impermanence. The movie is happier than the book, as movies often are.

But this conversation reminded me in a timely manner that I needed to let go myself. Let Robin tell the story, and assess the film on its own terms.



The next time I saw Robin was on the set while the restaurant scene with Grigg and Jocelyn was being filmed. I'd never been on a movie set before, and I took my son and daughter-in-law along since they live in LA and were as curious as I. It took several hours to film perhaps a dozen lines, the cameras were moved about to get a variety of angles. This was fun. I liked the feel on the set. I liked the way Robin worked with people. I was impressed by Hugh Dancy's naturalness and the way Maria Bello experimented with different readings each time. I wished to stay and see the next scene, the scene outside the restaurant, but it was time to fetch the grandchildren, and I was forced to choose between them and Jimmy Smits. Not an easy choice. I do have cute grandchildren.



My husband and I flew down to LA to the Sony compound (the same week *Spiderman 2* came out—the Sony compound was a happening place) and watched the almost-finished version with producer John Calley. He was delightful, and lunching with him one of the chief thrills of the whole experience. Robin is eager to work with him again, and I would be, too, if I were her.

I was much more nervous than I expected to be. I'd been so serene about the screenplay! But now I was almost unable to take the film in. My husband loved it. I was distracted by the strangeness of the experience, the unlikeliness of me, sitting in the Sony theater, watching a movie based on my book. The day was sort of dreamlike in that any-minute-I'll-wake-up way. I thought the movie was good, but I couldn't be sure. I was thrilled to hear an Aimee Mann song as part of the score. I was told it wouldn't stay, but it did and still pleases me enormously. I'd rather write like Aimee Mann than like me any day of the week.

The credits were also quite wonderful, with their pictures of caterers and photographers and lighting specialists and the like. If other directors were as nice as Robin, all movies would end this way. I went home with gifts! I have a Jane Austen mug now that says, *What Would Jane Cut?* This is apparently puzzling to people who see it outside the context of a movie. Their impulse is to think it has something to do with vasectomies. As if!

The next time I saw the movie was the actual premiere. My primary concern was how to dress, and then it truly didn't matter—I would have been fine in jeans (although I love my dress and need to be asked immediately to another party so I can wear it again). I learned that the red carpet does not

actually lead into the theater, but is on the side and roped off so the wrong people don't wander onto it. My agent took my family out to dinner, all very swank. I knew I would be introduced at the end of the show, but the evening was about the movie, not me, and I was quite relaxed. Relaxed enough to really enjoy it this time through. More of it seemed to come out of my book than I'd realized on the first viewing, and those parts seemed to me to work really well.

As did many of the changes. These included: the scene in the bookstore where Grigg walks Jocelyn through the science fiction shelf. The idea that reading Ursula LeGuin can be the prelude to hot sex (though I would have had Jocelyn read the books in reverse order—*Left Hand of Darkness* is a much sexier book than *The Lathe of Heaven*). I even love that every time Hugh Dancy says the name Ursula, you remember for just that moment that he's actually British, because of his pronunciation. I had not thought the haunted house Grigg sets up for the meeting on *Northanger Abbey* was going to work as well as it did, but I loved it. The entire cast was amazing.

There was a party after the premiere. I met Marc Blucas, a favorite of mine from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I ate a piece of Maggie Grace's birthday cake. My son was amused by the sight of me and my husband in a Hollywood club because we had no lives before he was born and never went anywhere or did anything after either.

In the next few weeks I had many radio interviews, some of which were fun and some of which were at 5 a.m. I got email from many people out of my past, occasionally with names I didn't actually remember.

And then it was over!

I spent much of this experience oddly unable to process the fact that it was happening to me and not to someone else. In retrospect it all seems delightful. It was an amazing gift and not one I ever expected. I'm proud of how closely the movie follows the events in my book but am also unconcerned about the deviations. Perhaps the most startling thing I learned is that I feel far less proprietary and persnickety regarding my own work than I do regarding Austen's.

The first line in my book is that we all have our private Austen. I talk a good game about allowing people to like her for the wild variety of reasons people like her. The sham is exposed when I see the movies and turn out to be quite cross if the book onscreen isn't exactly the book as I read it.

But perhaps this isn't so surprising, after all. I've been reading her longer than I've been writing. I've probably read her books more often than I've read my own. I love them more. Simple as that.