

ARTS & LIFE

Jane Austen's timeless appeal: Two local authors publish spin-off novels



by Carolyn Brown
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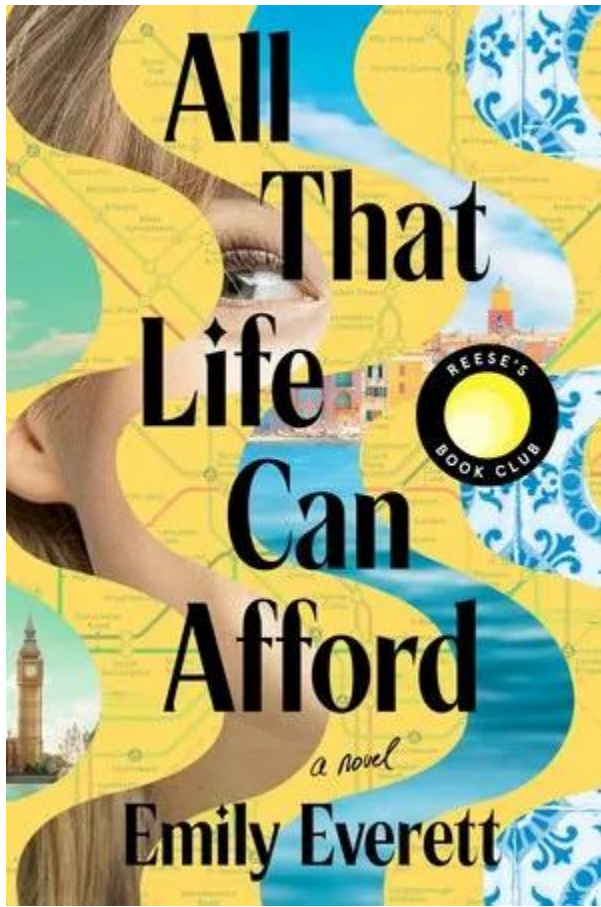
Jane Austen's complex characters and witty take on class and society continue to inspire new generations of readers and writers. And the ingenuity of the celebrated English author, who was born 250 years ago next week, has sparked a unique connection to the Valley: two authors from the same town both published their own spinoff novels of Austen's books this year.



Emily Everett, author of "All That Life Can Afford," and Bob McMaster, author of "Emma and George: The Knightleys Highbury," at the Smith College Lyman Plant House and Conservatory. CAROL LOLLIS / Staff Photo

Authors Emily Everett and Robert McMaster, who lived about a mile away from each other in Williamsburg, both share an affinity for Austen's novels. But as it happens, Everett, who now resides in Northampton, and McMaster, who still lives in Williamsburg, had never met — until the Gazette reached out.

"I think the contrast between Emily's book and my book is pretty stark, even though we're both basing our stories on Jane Austen," said McMaster. Still, he appreciated that the protagonist of Everett's novel has to navigate an unfamiliar aristocracy, just as many of Austen's protagonists do: "I



think that's pretty neat," he said. Everett's book, "All That Life Can Afford," is a contemporary retelling of "Pride and Prejudice." It's based on Everett's experiences growing up working-class on a farm, idealizing Britain because of Jane Austen's novels, moving to London for graduate school and working as a tutor for wealthy families. Its protagonist, Anna Byrne, also falls into a love triangle with two men, including one who appears at first to be the perfect match, at least on paper, and one whom she doesn't get along with initially.

Still, Everett said that though the book has romance as a major plot point, it is, at its core, a novel about money, class privilege and the like — as are Austen's romance novels.

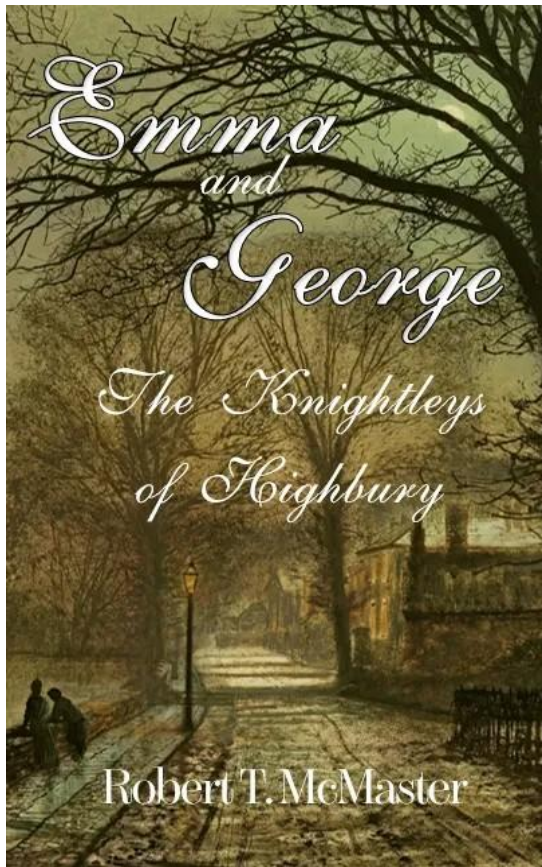
"It's not a book that I wrote because I felt bad about being working-class, which is what the character experiences. It's a book that I wrote to experiment with: what if I had felt bad about that?" she said.

Funnily enough, Everett, a Smith College alum and longtime Austen fan who called herself an "English major since birth," didn't intend to write a novel inspired by "Pride and Prejudice."

"I never really thought of it as a 'Pride and Prejudice' spin-off," she said, "but when the reviews started coming in, that's what they said, and I was like, 'Sure, okay, if it helps people buy the book!'"

Earlier this year, actress Reese Witherspoon selected the novel as the April pick for "**Reese's Book Club**," saying that it "had me hooked the moment I started the audiobook ... I cannot stop thinking about it." Everett found out about the accolade a few months in advance, but the official announcement came the same day her book — which was also her debut novel — was published.

"I always tell people that it was like being shot out of a cannon on your first day of work," Everett said.



McMaster's book, "Emma and George: The Knightleys of Highbury," is a sequel to Austen's "Emma," following the titular characters as they return home after their honeymoon. Still, McMaster said in a press release, "I give you fair warning, the Knightleys of Highbury and their friends — the Westons, the Martins, the Churchills and all — are in for a rough ride."

McMaster, a former biology professor at Holyoke Community College, has written four other books as well, including three historical novels set in western Massachusetts and a biography of Edward Hitchcock, a geologist, paleontologist and professor who became Amherst College's third president.

McMaster's love of history informed his writing process for "Emma and George," which involved researching details about the Regency Era, including daily life, politics, farming and religion. Unlike Everett's book, his book is written in an Austenesque prose style. It begins, "You will find no finer county in all of England than Surrey,

and no finer village in Surrey than Highbury. It is a quiet, unpretentious place entirely lacking in frills or frivolous things." As he was writing, McMaster went through a number of e-books of Austen's works and highlighted terms that modern audiences are unfamiliar with — for example, "barouche," a type of carriage — and made a point to use them in his book, with enough context clues that readers could figure out their meanings.

He likewise wanted to keep the book's plot as traditionally Austenian as possible — "Don't worry, there's not going to be any werewolves or zombies or murders!" he laughed, referring to modern Austen adaptations and retellings like the 2009 parody novel (and a 2016 movie) "Pride and Prejudice and Zombies."

Austen fans will celebrate the author's 250th birthday on Tuesday, Dec. 16. After 250 years, what gives Austen her staying power is that she wrote complex characters.

"None of them are as simple as you might first think," McMaster said.

Beyond that, her books also feature working-class characters who climb the social ladder, which resonates with readers across generations, he added.

Everett said what makes Austen's writing "stick to your ribs" and keeps it enduringly in the public eye is "her really witty take on class and society."

“Her characters live within the norms of a society where they have to act a certain way — you can’t just walk up to Mr. Darcy; you have to be introduced,” she said. “They do have to follow those rules, but her best heroines are always these girls who don’t always follow the rules.”

“[Austen] acknowledges that there are such things as class and privilege and that money matters,” Everett added, “it matters if you have an inheritance ... but that at the end of the day, with some pluck and courage and maybe a little bit of a rebel streak, you can also still get your happy ending.”

For more information about Everett, visit emily-everett.com. For more information about McMaster, visit theknightleys.com.