

The Jane Austen Project

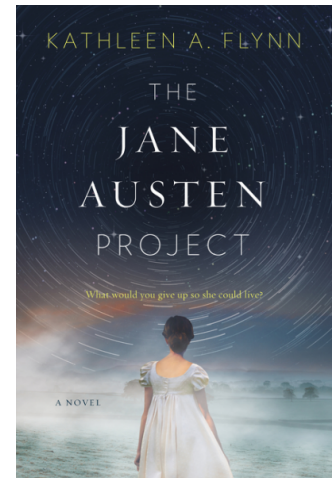
Harper Perennial

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Introduction

Perfect for fans of Jane Austen, this engrossing debut novel offers an unusual twist on the legacy of one of the world's most celebrated and beloved authors: two researchers from the future are sent back in time to meet Jane and recover a suspected unpublished novel.



London, 1815: Two travelers—Rachel Katzman and Liam Finucane—arrive in a field in rural England, disheveled and weighed down with hidden money. Turned away at a nearby inn, they are forced to travel by coach all night to London. They are not what they seem, but rather colleagues who have come back in time from a technologically advanced future, posing as wealthy West Indies planters—a doctor and his spinster sister. While Rachel and Liam aren't the first team from the future to “go back,” their mission is by far the most audacious: meet, befriend, and steal from Jane Austen herself.

Carefully selected and rigorously trained by The Royal Institute for Special Topics in Physics, disaster-relief doctor Rachel and actor-turned-scholar Liam have little in common besides the extraordinary circumstances they find themselves in. Circumstances that call for Rachel to stifle her independent nature and let Liam take the lead as they infiltrate Austen's circle via her favorite brother, Henry.

But diagnosing Jane's fatal illness and obtaining an unpublished novel hinted at in her letters pose enough of a challenge without the continuous convolutions of living a lie. While her friendship with Jane deepens and her relationship with Liam grows complicated, Rachel fights to reconcile the woman she is with the proper lady nineteenth-century society expects her to be. As their portal to the future prepares to close, Rachel and Liam struggle with their directive to leave history intact and exactly as they found it...however heartbreaking that may prove.

Questions for Discussion

1. What characteristics and skills do you suppose made the Project's leaders choose Rachel and Liam to go to 1815? How do their abilities complement each other? In what ways do their backgrounds and personalities contrast?

2. Consider the role of “the marriage plot” in Jane Austen novels and how it is echoed in Rachel’s relationships with Henry and Liam. Do either of these men remind you of characters in a Jane Austen novel? Which ones?
3. What does Rachel learn about herself in the course of her own marriage plot? Do you think she’ll be happy in the end?
4. The world that Rachel and Liam come from is described more in hints than in great detail: technological advances, a despoiled environment, a catastrophic event known as the Die-Off. Is there more that you wish had been spelled out? Like what?
5. Consider the term “Old British.” What are the defining characteristics of Old Britishness, since it is not an ethnic or demographic designation, or at least not merely one? (For instance, we learn early on that Norman Ng, whose family came from pre-Chinese-takeover Hong Kong, is Old British.) Is it more of a class marker? Is that why Liam seemingly tries to pass as Old British, or might there be some other reason?
6. Does Jane Austen as a fictional character in this novel correspond with your own idea of the real historical figure? Why or why not?
7. Do you think Henry Austen truly liked Rachel, or was he just after her money?
8. Does Liam’s explanation of his involvement with Sabina make sense to you? What might he have left unsaid?
9. Do you think Liam’s rejection of Rachel’s sexual advances at the Angel says more about him personally or about the social norms of the world they come from? Do you think his stated reasons are the real ones?
10. Consider the scene near the end where Henry confronts Rachel and Liam. Could our time travelers have handled this better? What would you have done?
11. In general, is there any point where you feel that Rachel or Liam made a bad decision? When and why?

12. Did it seem out of character to you that Rachel would go away without trying to see Liam again?
13. Eva Farmer tells Rachel: "The past is a collective fiction like anything else.... It exists because we *agree* it does. It has no objective reality." Do you think there is anything to this idea? Can you think of examples in your own life or in recent history where reality – or at least the meaning of events – seemed to change in retrospect, looking different in hindsight?
14. Were you satisfied with the ending of the novel, or were you left with unanswered questions?
15. If time travel were possible, would you go? What time and place would you want to visit?