

Books grow out of other books; or Favourites revisited

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Jane Austen, P.G. Wodehouse and Ian Fleming provide the inspiration for four new novels, reviewed here by *Brian McFarlane*

Painting from the cover of the US edition of Jo Baker's *Longbourn*.

WHEN the late, great novelist Ivy Compton-Burnett was interviewed about her working methods, she was characteristically uncompromising. "As far as books are concerned, I find life no help at all. Books grow out of other books."

Well, not always in the way Dame Ivy had in mind, perhaps, as the trickle of novels that owe their existence to very specific earlier books threatens to become a flood. Not that this kind of thing is altogether new: forty-seven years ago Tom Stoppard wittily pillaged *Hamlet* to produce a play called *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* – and then went on to raid *The Importance of Being Earnest* (not to mention the lives of James Joyce and others) for *Travesties* in 1974.

So if plays can grow out of other plays, then there is obviously no reason why novels shouldn't grow out of other novels. Some of these are dire, like Emma Tennant's vulgarly opportunist *Pemberley: Or Pride and Prejudice Continued* (2005) and *Emma in Love* (1996), which traduce two great novels. Others work more evocatively, like Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a postcolonial reimagining of *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of the madwoman in the attic, or Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), which, with elliptic brilliance, resituates Magwitch at the heart of *Great Expectations*.

Not surprisingly, Jane Austen's novels are a popular source. I somehow missed out on reading *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), but *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2011), by that dextrous doyenne of detective fiction, P.D. James, drew not only on our recollections of the original novel but also, in a casual spattering, from other Austen novels, to trace the fortunes and misfortunes of Elizabeth Bennet's married life. It worked as a thriller and as an imaginative follow-up to its famous original, and James was an elegant enough stylist not to offend even the most rabid member of the Jane Austen Society.

Jo Baker has done something a little different in *Longbourn*, giving us *Pride and Prejudice* as it might have been seen from the point of view of those below stairs. She has a firm grip on both the original and on her own project, and the result is not merely compelling in itself but also makes us reconsider Austen's world and its limitations. Joanna Trollope's *Sense & Sensibility* (a bit cheeky retaining Austen's title, but with an ampersand replacing "and") has quite daringly relocated the original to the world of laptops and iPhones and non-marital sex. Both of these works throw up some daring challenges to the new authors, challenges that have been met with a surprising degree of success in at least one case.

But whereas Jane Austen gave up writing 200 years ago, just prior to her death, and the new authors have only the wrath of the Jane Austen Society to fear, the other two books I'm concerned with here are nearer to our own time. The more remote of the two, Sebastian Faulks's *Jeeves and the Wedding Bells*, takes on P.G. Wodehouse in an interwar saga of country-house machinations; the other, William Boyd's *Solo*, is daringly described as "A James Bond novel." All four were published in 2013, so the phenomenon of books growing out of other books is

clearly alive and well.

My overall attitude to [film adaptations](#) of classic and/or popular works is always to allow the adaptor free rein to see what new thing can be made from whatever has excited the maker about the original. If you want to have the same experience you had when you read, say, *Pride and Prejudice*, then read it again rather than watching a film and getting cross at every “infidelity.” On the same basis, if you’re reading a novel whose source is another novel, it’s probably better to grant it a level of autonomy. If it doesn’t satisfy you, it may be best to consider in what ways, as a new piece of fiction, it doesn’t work, rather than simply comparing it, to its almost certain disadvantage, to its distinguished forebear.

Longbourn and beyond

Of the Austen pair, Jo Baker’s *Longbourn* seems to me a really substantial work in its own right. When I saw the 2005 film version of *Pride and Prejudice*, I was struck by the way the word “farm,” used once in conversation in the novel, was given a visual life that placed the Bennet family in a realist setting I’d never imagined before. *Longbourn* picks up on references to the Bennets’ housekeeper, Hill, and constructs a narrative around what may well have been the facts of the life of such a character. Brilliant as Austen is, one is never likely to be much occupied by the lives of the servants in her novels. Baker gives a persuasive account of how the upstairs family might have appeared to its below-stairs minions, and finds some provocative parallels as well as offering inter-class perceptions.

When James Smith applies for a position at Longbourn, the Bennet farm, his disruptive effect on the housemaid, Sarah, recalls how Elizabeth Bennet responded to Darcy, of whose taciturn, sexual presence Smith reminds us. Just as Elizabeth was confused by Darcy and by the more obvious – and, as it proves, deceptive – charms of Wickham, so Sarah is attracted not only to the new Longbourn groom but also by Mr Bingley’s dashing manservant Ptolemy, who is no more to be trusted than Wickham was. Further confirming Sarah as a downstairs version of Elizabeth, she is matched with an underservant called Polly whose vapid responses echo those of the younger Bennet girls.

But the lower orders are not just there to remind us of their betters, as it were; they have lives of their own. They have sexual stirrings, and sometimes act on them, in ways that would have shocked those upstairs (and probably Jane Austen); and in one crucial matter their lives are intricately connected to their employers in a way known only to Mrs Hill and Mr Bennet. Because I want to encourage people to read this intelligently reimagined account of lives only hinted at in *Pride and Prejudice*, I won’t reveal any more about these connections. Suffice to say, they have a ring of imaginative truth that I suspect the Great Jane would have respected. Baker convinces us that the servant class might have had feelings as strong as those (most often) restrained by their masters. She also, by placing James Smith for some time in the army and a participant in what became known as the Napoleonic Wars, reminds us that the world of Austen’s novels is only a small window on life at the turn of the nineteenth century. There were, Baker reminds us, real brutalities and injustices in the larger world, not just below but also beyond Longbourn and its neighbours.

Sense & Sensibility

You don’t have to be familiar with *Pride and Prejudice* to find reading *Longbourn* a rewarding read, but if you are, it will probably enrich the experience of approaching some of the same territory from a different perspective. Joanna Trollope is working from another kind of standpoint in her *Sense & Sensibility*. Don’t tell anyone, but I have never read this member of the Trollope family before, though I’m a fan of the prodigious output of her distant relative, Anthony. Someone – I forget whom – once described her novels as “Aga sagas,” middle-class fictions iconically characterised by the Aga stove and the tea-drinking that took place around it. This was no doubt unfairly dismissive, but on the basis of her contemporary reimagining of Austen I don’t feel inclined to pursue her other work too tenaciously. This sounds like more of a putdown than I intend, but her *Sense & Sensibility* does make me wonder just what sort of project she had in mind. Whereas Jo Baker was seriously trying to envisage another kind of life’s going on at the same time as that of the Bennets and their circle, Trollope’s agenda is to relocate Austen’s characters and their narrative trajectories to a twenty-first-century setting. It’s hard not to ask oneself, just what is the point? Is it meant to explore whether the oppositions and

conflicts that underpin Austen's novel are still viable in the world of Google and texting? And, if so, is that enough for a 350-page novel to have on its mind?

So, what we have here is a different form of adaptation from Baker's, not of itself necessarily better or worse but in this case seemingly less serious. It's not quite a parallel to those Shakespearian films that set *Coriolanus* (2011) in a contemporary war-torn Eastern European state, say, or offer Helen Mirren as a female Prospero, as in Julie Taymor's postcolonialist version of *The Tempest* (2010). These versions retain the bard's language and seem to be testing its relevance, and the ideas it articulates, in settings removed in time and place. Trollope is doing something rather different and, I suspect, less significant. And one perhaps small question: what effect does it have on the reader who is familiar with the Austen original to know how all the "problems" of the Dashwood family will work themselves out in the end? We do reread favourite novels anyway, however, so there must be more going for them than merely answers to the hypotheses set up by the narrative trajectory.

At issue here is whether Trollope's novel *does* have these extra pleasures to compensate the reader who knows that Marianne Dashwood will enjoy a final clinch with someone called Brandon and that sister Elinor will ditto with Edward Ferrers. My answer is, Not quite. This is not to say that there are no pleasures along the way. Trollope catches the remorseless malice of manipulative Lucy Steele very precisely in modern terms, for instance, and there is a wittily bitchy exchange between Belle (Elinor and Marianne's mother – unmarried in Trollope's version) and Fanny, who has manoeuvred Belle and her daughters out of their old home. But incidental touches like these can't hold the narrative together and the attempt to take the Austen story and relocate it just doesn't work in the new setting. Merely having the youngest daughter Margaret talk about a couple "snogging" or Marianne exclaiming "Bollocks!" isn't enough to convince us that the emotional pressures and conflicts inherited from the original have the same weight 200 years later.

Nor is the spelling out of matters of thematic importance – as when the romantically egoistic Marianne tells her mother that Elinor's problem is that she "doesn't waste her energies longing for things like I do. She thinks before she feels, Ma" – any replacement for letting these qualities of character emerge in action. Later come these sentences: "Marianne was impulsive to the point of wilfulness, entirely certain that what had captured her imagination needed no other justification... It was wonderful and terrible to see the consequences of Marianne's predilection for allowing emotion to prevail over everything..." Coming two-thirds of the way through the book, this sort of explicit commentary seems to point to the novelist's uncertainty about whether she has adequately dramatised what matters about her characters. As I've suggested, there is some fun in the updating but not really enough to engross our attention or to fix this tale of thwarted feelings in our minds.

Jeeves ascendant

Anyone who has read Sebastian Faulks's *Pistache* (think carefully before you pronounce it) will know that he has a razor-sharp gift for parody. In that slim 2006 volume, he caught the tone of everyone from Jane Austen to John Updike, and the result was pure, unadulterated pleasure for the reader, though one can't be certain how his subjects, such as are still living, might have reacted. But where the pieces of *Pistache* were never more than one or two pages in length, Faulks has now taken on an entire volume in the manner of one of his funniest *pistachers*, P.G. Wodehouse, and this is a more ambitious undertaking. Overall, he meets the challenge he has set himself, though Wodehouse addicts may quibble over this or that locution or intricate bit of plot manoeuvring.

What we get here is a palimpsest effect whereby traces of the earlier master make their presence felt at the same time as we register what Faulks is up to. The basic plot device is the reversal of the positions of nitwitted Bertie Wooster and his erudite manservant Jeeves. For reasons too complicated to go into here, Jeeves has to pass himself off as Lord Etringham in the country house of cash-strapped Sir Henry Venables, while Bertie is reduced to playing the role of his "man" and finds himself in below-stairs accommodation of a kind to which he is not accustomed. Oh, and Bertie has fallen in love with the beautiful Georgiana Meadows, whom he has met on the Riviera but who feels, on return to Hampshire, committed to another liaison, out of loyalty to guardian Venables... and so on. Naturally all the principals will fetch up at the Venables pad, and Bertie will be forced to wear a disguise and to take Jeeves his morning tea, and between them they will have to deal with numerous tricky situations which bear the same relation to real life as Wodehouse's own narratives usually do. "Surely even you, Bertie, are aware that there's been a General Strike?" says one of his slightly better-informed friends,

offering the tiniest suggestion of life out there, but not enough to dispel the sense of Wodehouse's world that Faulks is at such pains to summon up.

As the plot moves towards a dénouement which will no doubt preclude the possibility of further adventures in Woosterland, there is a lot of fun to be had. Faulks's grip on Wodehouse's protagonists is sure enough for the reader to feel in safe hands. Consider the following brief exchange, begun with Jeeves telling Bertie:

"A gentleman called an hour ago to see you but I told him you were not to be disturbed. A Mr Beeching, sir. He said he would return at eleven."

"Good God, not 'Woody' Beeching?"

"He did not confide his first name, sir."

"Tallish chap, eyes like a hawk?"

"There was a suggestion of the accipitrine, sir."

Look how recognisably the shade of Wodehouse informs this utterly typical exchange. Bertie naturally is still in bed at 10 am; naturally his friend would be called something like "Woody," if not (to quote others from the book) "Corky" or "Pongo"; and, whereas Bertie hasn't energy for a full sentence, Jeeves's replies are models of syntactical exactitude. And Jeeves's vocabulary as ever testifies to his erudition: perhaps you knew what "accipitrine" meant, but I admit to seeing it here for the first time. It is one of Faulks's triumphs that he sustains the contrasting diction of Bertie and Jeeves throughout the book's length without apparent strain, and finally Jeeves emerges not merely as the fount of all wisdom but also as the orchestrator of Bertie's future happiness.

There is wit at the expense of snobberies about variously "low-browed sons of the toil" and the "wisdom" of Bertie's housemaster at Eton, who advised that "Women are queer cattle." The wit in these swipes is Faulks's but it might just as easily be Wodehouse's.

Bond, James Bond

About William Boyd's *Solo*, I have one very serious misgiving. On the front cover it proclaims itself A JAMES BOND NOVEL, suggesting that it may be the first in a series. Why this worries me is that I have a very high regard for Boyd as a novelist, on the basis of at least a half-dozen superior works of fiction, above all the masterly *Any Human Heart* (2002), and I shouldn't like to think that this major talent is being deflected into the no-doubt-remunerative Bond franchise. It's not that he hasn't done this well; rather, there are more important things he has shown he can do better than most.

That gripe out of the way, it has to be said that he has absorbed – and reincarnated – a good deal of Fleming's hero. Bond is now forty-five, which dates the action of *Solo* as being about 1969 as he recalls his wartime experiences as a nineteen-year-old in the later years of the war. Back in his Chelsea flat, he is haunted from time to time by gruesome incidents in Normandy a couple of decades earlier. He has, of course, been dining at the Dorchester, where he engages in "carnal appraisal" of a woman called Bryce, who invites him to a "cocktail party" that, mysteriously, doesn't seem to be happening when he fetches up at her house in Richmond. He tries out a new car, a Jensen FF, which "worked on him like an aphrodisiac," and there's quite a lot drinking of superior wines and whiskeys.

All this is about to come to an abrupt end when M gives him his new job. He is to pose as a journalist for a French newspaper so as to infiltrate the West African country, Zanzarim, a former British colony, now independent but split in two and the site of a horrific civil war. "And what am I meant to do once I get there?" Bond not unreasonably asks. M's succinct reply, as he "smiled again, more broadly," is "Stop the war, of course." Bond being Bond, we can't seriously doubt his ultimate success, but there is a good deal more entertaining action (revealing Bond's physical endurance and social conscience), more drinking and more carnal appraisal

(and acting on it), as Bond makes his way to and through the conflicted area.

Boyd knows his Africa and he knows his Bond. I just hope, though, that his word will not prove *in toto* to be his Bond – or do I mean vice versa?

So, about these books

If you've read the precursor texts that gave rise to the four novels considered here, your experience of the new novel will almost certainly be richer. At worst, if you haven't, you may well sense gaps in your understanding of what's going on. But the new novelists can't count on familiarity with the earlier dealings with these characters and the events they find themselves involved in. This sub-genre, of books owing their origins to other books, is now numerous enough to need a name. "Palimpsest" seems a bit pretentious, and "hypertext" sounds too academic to catch on. Any suggestions? •

