

AMY ELIZABETH SMITH

ALL
ROADS
LEAD TO
AUSTEN

A YEARLONG
JOURNEY
WITH JANE

*"An Austenesque journey of a lifetime...
You won't put it down, trust me!"*

—Sharon Lathan, bestselling author of
Mr. & Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy



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A YEARLONG JOURNEY WITH JANE



AMY ELIZABETH SMITH

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This book is a memoir. It reflects the author's present recollections of her experiences over a period of years. Some names and characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been re-created.

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For my fabulous, understanding mother and the memory of my father—the beloved Old Welshman.

Author's Note

This all happened—*All Roads Lead to Austen* is nonfiction. I've changed some names (and in one case, the identity of a stuffed animal) for privacy. I may have gotten a few details wrong, but I did the best I could from memory and extensive travel notes. I recorded all of the reading groups, and because they were done in Spanish, I had to translate. I haven't caught all of the subtleties of the original conversations—which ranged from two to six hours each—but I've tried my best. For narrative flow at times I've changed the sequence in which certain things were said (long conversations tend to meander, with lots of interruptions and backtracking). For the same reason, I've occasionally changed the sequence in which conversations took place.

My discussions of literature from each of the six countries are *very* selective. I could have used standard literary histories to be more comprehensive, but that's not what this trip was about—I wanted to learn about local literature by letting bookstore clerks recommend titles or having new friends hand me things they felt I'd enjoy. Latin American literature is endlessly beautiful, rich, and rewarding. What I discuss here is just the tip of the iceberg! (For more detail on some of the authors I mention, see www.allroadsleadtoausten.com).

A few technical points. There's a custom in Spanish to capitalize only the first word of book titles—so in English it's *Pride and Prejudice*, but in Spanish, it's *Orgullo y prejuicio*. For consistency's sake, I'm using the English style for titles both in English and Spanish. Also, it's standard in scholarly publications to use ellipses to indicate if you've shortened a quote. I've done so silently in a few spots for flow (but never to change the meaning).

Getting Started

Jane Austen just won't stay on the page.

I enjoy everything I teach at a small university in California, but I especially love my Jane Austen course. The students and I read her novels together, discuss Austen's historical context, and explore the amazing ways Austen keeps coming to life through sequels, updates, and spin-offs—Bridget Jones in Bollywood, zombies, and all. Instead of writing final papers, students do Austen projects that we showcase in December at a public Jane Austen Night bash. We've had *Northanger Abbey* in rhyme, heroic couplets, a short play with the Dashwood sisters transformed into gay brothers, a sign language lesson using Austen plots, and my favorite, a marriage of Kafka and Austen: *Emmamorphosis*, where Emma wakes up one fine day as a giant cockroach (just *imagine* what her exoskeleton does to her beautiful muslins!).

Austen moves her readers. Semester after semester, when my students talk about Austen's novels, they transition seamlessly between their own lives and Austen's fictional world. "My sister is such an uptight Elinor, she makes me crazy!" somebody will always say after we start *Sense and Sensibility*. Or, "Yeah, I've met a Willoughby or two." Or with endless variations, "Marianne needs a *serious* dope slap." By the end of each semester I can compile a list of the most smackable characters from student feedback: topping the charts are always Marianne, both Eltons from *Emma*, John Thorpe from *Northanger Abbey*, and of course, Mrs. Bennet.

Students just don't react this way to novels I teach in other classes, such as *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre*. Austen's postmortem rivals wrote great novels, but not a single student has read Emily or Charlotte Brontë and reported back to the class, "That Heathcliff is *just* like my ex-boyfriend," "Rochester's wife reminds me of my aunt," or "Somebody ought to pop Jane Eyre a good one!" No more. Brontë World is to be viewed and enjoyed at a distance, but Austenland is a place where people feel inclined to get cozy with the locals, even give a few verbal wedgies. Or a dope slap.

It's not only my students who react this way to Austen. After a rough divorce, my friend Larry, a fellow native Pennsylvanian, went into an emotional tailspin. He ditched his job and, out of the blue, retrained as a railroad engineer. This led to long hours in hotel rooms between runs, either brooding alone or phoning me for where-did-it-go-wrong debriefs.

"You're an English teacher—what should I read?" he asked one evening, realizing we needed *something* to talk about other than his still-broken heart. "Would I like Jane Austen?"

Pride and Prejudice, her best-paced work, seemed a good recommendation for a man spending too much time staring out of train windows wondering how his marriage had gone off the rails. After longer than usual silence, I got his first post-Austen call. "I liked it. Took a little getting used to the style, though," he said in his endearing Pittsburgh twang, *à la* "let's go daahntaahn 'n watch a Stille

game.”

“You know,” he went on, “I thought I married a Lizzy Bennet, but maybe I really picked a Lydia? Well, so much for diverting him from divorce talk. As Larry made his way through all of Austen’s novels—even *Mansfield Park*, whose heroine he dubbed the most “smackable” of all—our long conversations became populated by Emma, Captain Wentworth, Fanny Price, and others.

What is it about Jane Austen that makes us talk about the characters as if they’re real people? People we recognize in our own lives, two centuries after Austen created them? When my first development leave from the university rolled around, I decided it was time for me to try my own Austen project, just like my students do. Something creative, something fun. So I got to wondering: the special connection that people feel with Austen’s world, this Austen magic—would it happen with people in another country, reading Austen in translation?

Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is one of the most moving books I’ve ever read on how literature matters in people’s lives. She covered six different authors with the same group of students in post-revolution Iran. Inspired, I decided to try a new twist. Why not read the same author but shift through six different countries, instead? Jane Austen reading groups, on the road.

Growing up, I envied Nancy Drew’s jet-setting ways, which set me on a course to travel at every opportunity as an adult. I spent a year in Prague in the early 1990s, and since my brother Shawn has an even worse travel bug than my own, I’ve tagged along like a good little sister to visit him when he’s lived in Italy, then South Africa, then Egypt. With that year’s leave from the university ahead of me, I wanted to explore new territory: Central and South America.

In *Clueless*, the nineties update of Austen’s *Emma*, the heroine Cher offends her family’s Salvadoran maid by assuming that anybody who speaks “Mexican” must *be* a Mexican. But Cher’s not worse than the average clueless North American. Central and South Americans are our neighbors, but all too many of us can’t tell one country from another south of the border. At work I’d met *latinos* and *latinas* from a host of countries I couldn’t locate without studying a map.

So, on the road I could pick up some firsthand knowledge while seeing what Latin Americans would make of Jane Austen. Would they identify with her characters? Or maybe want to smack a few? Plus, I could find out who *their* Jane Austens were—which authors are beloved in Central and South America, which novels come to life off the pages. It would be a whole new world of books (and bookstores!).

Unfortunately, the only lesson I remembered from high school Spanish was that *pero* means “but” and *perro*, “dog.” Thanks to my university’s ties with a language school in the city of Antigua, I settled on Guatemala for both a warm-up and a starting point. The plan was to take five weeks of Spanish lessons during my winter break, then return in July to begin my “year with Jane” in earnest. I’d do my first reading group there.

The second country would let me mix business with pleasure. I’d made two short trips to Puerto Vallarta prior to cooking up my Austen project. In fact, maybe that influenced my planning—because in Mexico I’d met Diego, a cheerful, handsome taxi driver who also happened to be a booklover. We were both eager for a much longer visit. I wasn’t a fan of long-distance relationships, but there was something special about Diego. I was willing to jump in and see how things might turn out.

For country number three, I decided on Ecuador, where I could visit a friend-of-a-friend in Guayaquil. The next and longest stop would be Chile. I signed on to teach with a study abroad program for a semester in Santiago, where I was sure I could find some interested Austen readers. After that I'd head for Paraguay to stay with another friend-of-a-friend. Even without a connection, who could resist a mysterious, allegedly dangerous place almost nobody can find on a map? For the big finale, I'd spend a month in Buenos Aires, Argentina. I didn't know a soul there, but it seemed fitting that Jane Austen should wrap up her Latin American tour in the city many consider the literary capital of South America.

With five weeks in Antigua under my belt (and plenty of practice), I had a foundation for speaking Spanish. As I read and planned, I could see that each country would be unique, but the five-week language trip offered me a taste of what to expect. I walked the cobbled streets of a colonial Spanish city; I saw looming, active volcanoes; I heard marimba music at midnight; I learned to make my way through Conan the Barbarian stories in Spanish.

Come that May, there wasn't a student on campus more eager than I was to bolt. Was I nervous about spending a year away from family and friends, trying to function in a foreign language I had a tenuous grip on while convincing several dozen people in six different countries to join me for book groups? You bet. Was I excited about the trip anyway? *You bet!* When classes were done, I packed up my worldly goods and found new homes for my chickens—three Cochins, a white Silkie hen, and Nikolaus-Nikolaus, a strutting Frizzle rooster named after a stern German ancestor. Stopping through Pennsylvania, I bought my mom a computer so we could use email along with phone calls; she's a worrier. And I visited my father's grave.

One evening a few years back, he'd set down the book he'd been reading and a heart attack took him fast, right there at home with the woman he'd loved for fifty years. The book was a novelization of *Casablanca*, a film he'd seen repeatedly, so as my dad slipped away, he wasn't even troubled with any nagging questions about how it would all turn out. To me, that's kind of a big deal. Unless I go to my sleep, I fully expect to be dragged off to eternity with at least three half-read books around somewhere, wryly wondering the genre-appropriate version of "Damnation, *whodunit?!?*"

Raised by booklovers, I'll be a booklover 'til the end. In fact, now that I'm back from Latin America, I regret only one thing connected with my year's travels—that my father, the man who built me my first bookshelves, won't get to meet the devoted reader I'm about to marry, someone who played a role in my Austen adventure. Diego from Mexico? Maybe. Maybe not. But I will say this: Austen fans know, when Austen's in the picture, somebody's going to end up hitched.

My dad would have loved my fiancé's sense of humor and his insight. After I'd returned to the States and was talking to some people about the book groups I'd done, one of them frowned and said, "That was superimposing European literature on those people, you know." The man didn't outright call me a Yankee Imperialist Pig-dog, but that seemed to be the subtext. When I passed this comment on to my fiancé, he was both annoyed and amused.

"Sounds like he's confusing you with the CIA in the 1970s," he said. "So *latina* cultures are so feeble that we can't enjoy a Jane Austen novel without our literary world collapsing? Somebody needs to learn a bit about Latin America."

Austen was a fan of not making assumptions—of avoiding prejudices—of making sure you’re reading a situation (or a person or a place) very carefully. She never set foot outside of England, but what she has to teach about astute reading applies across time, across borders, and even, as I came to learn, across languages.

I wish I could say that I never made any gaffes of my own while traveling, that I never brought too much old baggage to new places or into relationships with people I met. But thanks to bad judgment (and at times, bad Spanish), I wound up in quite a few bonehead situations. Like fleeing from a ghost in a Mexican bookshop—putting a scare, myself, into some unfortunate Ecuadorians in a grocery store—fending off an amorous senior citizen in a Chilean laundry room—and on one stellar occasion, barely escaping a good hard soaking from a police water cannon.

Fate stepped in at times too, independent of my own blunders, to deal some painful surprises. I struggled for months with the most serious illness of my life, much to my poor mother’s distress. I made it through—but not all of the smart, warm, incredible new friends I met along the road were still around by the time I reached the end of it.

Yet, as Austen well knew, life’s challenges and sorrows help us appreciate what goes *right*. No amount of stumbling on my part could spoil the pleasures of drinking rooster beer in Guatemala; of floating in the gentle sea at Puerto Vallarta; of feeding a hoard of tame iguanas in an Ecuadorian park; of seeing the snowcapped Andes in Chile; of riding a rocking horse in a Paraguayan nightclub; or watching seductive Argentineans tango on a narrow street in Buenos Aires on a chilly afternoon.

In every country I visited, I had the pleasure of not just learning but living a new language, along with the nerdy fun of browsing bookstore after Spanish-language bookstore. And the Austen reading groups—each so different from the others, each letting me see Austen in surprising, enlightening, and amazing new ways. On top of it all, I wound up with a nice old-fashioned happy ending, one that still leaves me and my fiancé marveling at our own dumb luck for having crossed paths in the first place.

It was a wonderful year, mistakes and all. The funny thing is, I made my very biggest mistake before I even hit the road: I set off on my travels thinking of myself as a teacher, just because that’s how I earn a living.

So clueless. What a lot I had to learn.





GUATEMALA:

GIRLS' NIGHT OUT



In which the author returns to Guatemala and the language school, buys books, tries not to get impatient in restaurants, reads some great Guatemalan literature, drinks rooster beer, offers a few reflections on travel, and, at long last, discusses Pride and Prejudice with five bright, lovely Guatemalan women and (separately) one astute male misanthrope.



Chapter One

I can be a little...impatient. And as much as I love traveling, I'm prone to get panicky about the logistics. Watching all but a handful of passengers from my flight claim their bags and disappear while mine were nowhere in sight would usually have made me pretty twitchy. But I'd been in the Guatemala City airport before; since they'd lost my bags the first time, too, it felt kind of like a little "Welcome back!" I was too excited about the visit ahead to fuss over how long my luggage might take to catch up (first trip: four days).

Ahead of me was the beauty of Antigua, the challenge of more lessons at the language school, the hours I would spend with friends I'd met in December. For some people, travel is about adventure, something different at every turn, constantly seeing new places. But anyone who's read an Austen novel more than once—or any good novel—knows the pleasure of treading familiar ground. With a book as good as *Emma* (or *Great Expectations* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*), you can pick it up knowing how it ends but still discover something fresh and engaging each time around.

Mindful reading takes time and attention; so does mindful travel. A typical four-day stay just isn't enough to begin to understand a city and the people who live there. Extended travel—time to really read a place—is a luxury of the best, most rewarding kind. A whole year of it now lay ahead of me.

Antigua is about fifty minutes southwest of Guatemala City, so during the ride I caught up with Gustavo, the van driver I'd hired on my earlier stay as well. About my age, thoughtful, pleasant, and handsome, Gustavo is the proud father of three daughters. He updated me on his oldest, who was studying medicine. Getting into a university in Guatemala is tough; there aren't affordable state schools and community colleges around every corner. For female students in a culture with traditional, sharply defined gender roles, the road is tougher still. Gustavo had plenty of reason to be proud.

On this Austen-inspired trip, I couldn't help but wonder how the history of literature would be different if Austen's father hadn't been equally thrilled with his talented daughter. What if, instead of doing his best to help her publish, the Reverend George Austen had pushed harder for more grandkids and told Jane to leave the writing to her brothers? Scary thought.

"Are you back for more lessons?" Gustavo asked. He spoke slowly on purpose, his Spanish clear and easy to follow—he'd spent lots of hours ferrying students to and from the language school. I vowed to use only Spanish on my travels, and it was a pleasure to return to the fluid, beautiful language I wanted so badly to master.

"I'm back for more lessons and for something special," I answered (and since my own Spanish wasn't exactly so fluid or beautiful yet, I'm touching things up here in English). "I'll be holding

reading group with five teachers from the school, to talk about an English novel called *Pride and Prejudice*.”

“Are you reading the book in English?” he said in surprise. Most of the teachers at the language school didn’t speak English, since language immersion is its specialty.

“No, in Spanish. I want to see how well Austen translates.” There was much more encompassed in that word “translates” than I could explain to Gustavo in my gritty Spanish—I meant not only Austen’s language but her social vision, her fabulous casts of characters, her peerless ironic voice. How well would these flourish, transplanted to beautiful but troubled Guatemala, with a decades-long civil war in its recent past? Would readers here see themselves in Austen the way so many English-speaking readers do? Would they *recognize* these mothers, fathers, sisters, friends, and neighbors? Maybe even itch to manhandle a few of them, the way Larry and my California students often did?

These were the questions driving my travel, not just to Guatemala but to every country I would visit over the upcoming year. And I was willing to follow—wherever the answers might lead.

Settled into my hotel, the first order of business was a call to the States. There were several dozen ways grim fate could have snatched me up between my mother’s Pennsylvania living room and my Guatemalan hotel, so I had to demonstrate that I had survived them all. I’d recently celebrated my forty-second birthday. By that age, my mother already had a grandchild—but I was the youngest of four and as they say, once the baby, always the baby.

“You have a good sun hat, don’t you?” she asked.

The stores were full of them...how evil would it be to say yes, in the spirit of, “one is available if you need it?” Hopefully not too. “Yes, Mom.”

“Please be careful! Don’t forget what happened to Albert’s sister,” she reminded me (again) as we hung up. Albert was one of my high school boyfriends, and his sister died of a tropical fever during a Christian mission somewhere in Latin America. Which country, we never heard for sure. I can’t imagine how his poor parents dealt with it; as for Albert, losing his younger sister was heartbreaking.

Since we never did get the full story on the tropical fever, this local tragedy transformed the entire map of Latin America, in my mom’s concerned parental brain, into The Place Where Albert’s Sister Died. To her credit, she never *once* tried to talk me out of my plans. And anyway, my love of books was inextricably tied to spending hours in the small local library where she’d worked for more than twenty years. Mom had her hand in my desire to travel two continents with Austen, intentionally or not. But I knew she would worry about me nonstop, so lots of calls and emails were in order. If that seems juvenile for a forty-something, so be it.

The next morning I had a warm reunion with Nora, my point-person for the Austen group. With some people you can pick up a conversation seamlessly even after months of separation; that’s how it was with Nora. At the language school, teachers are assigned by the week, and during my initial visit Nora was my second teacher. Cheerful, curvy, and feminine, she had a mile-wide smile and a serious appreciation of harmless gossip.

Before working with Nora I’d studied under Élide, a delicate, petite woman in her sixties with

enormous, solemn eyes. With Élida, who would also be in our Austen group, I'd felt inspired to behave well. She reminded me of the "old-school" teachers I'd had back in Pennsylvania, ones who knew how to earn students' respect without coddling or pandering. But with Nora I felt free to share details about our love lives, the love lives of other teachers and students, the love lives we wish we had, etc. All in the name of education—you've got to use a lot of Spanish vocabulary to describe people's love lives.

Nora had rounded up the other three readers for the Austen group, fellow teachers from the language school, which from here on out I'll call *La Escuela*. Two months earlier, I'd mailed her five copies of *Orgullo y Prejuicio*, otherwise known as *Pride and Prejudice*, and she'd distributed them. Not Austen's best, in my opinion, but as her most popular novel it seemed the natural point of departure for Austen's Latin American travels.

"Everybody's excited about getting together for the group," Nora assured me with a grin. "How do you want to organize it?"

"Let's save it for the end of my visit. Every lesson counts for me! I'll be able to do a better job with our group if we hold off a bit. I know you're all really busy, so let's make it one session only," I suggested. The relief on her face was obvious. American women have our complaints, but the average American guy who cooks and cleans would be worth his weight in gold-wrapped chocolate in Antigua. Pretty much every woman I met there told me that she automatically has two full-time jobs if she works outside the home.

Classes would start up bright and early the next day, so Nora and I made the most of our time that beautiful Sunday catching up on gossip. After I found out how things were with her family and her daughter's upcoming wedding, she quickly steered things around to my own love life.

"So, are you dating anybody?" Her open, inviting gaze encouraged me to dish about Diego, even though I hadn't meant to quite yet.

"Yes and no. I've spent some time with somebody I really like, but it's long distance, so I'm not sure where it's going."

"How long is long?"

I hesitated a beat. "Mexico."

"Aha!" she laughed. "So that's why you're staying less time this visit! You want to run off to see your honey in Mexico!"

She had me there. I'd emailed Diego earlier that morning, knowing he wouldn't worry if a day or two passed before I could find an Internet café. He was the soul of contented cheerfulness. One day he'd pointed out, as we floated on our backs in the sea and I had been fretting about something, that the Spanish verb for "worry" is *preocupar*. In other words, to be "occupied" with something before you need to. I am my mother's daughter; I fret. But maybe with more time around Diego when I got to Mexico, I could learn to lighten up.

As Nora and I strolled toward the Parque Central, I was struck by how magically similar a July day felt to a January day—sunny, pleasant, no serious humidity in sight. Apparently it never gets too hot or too cold in Antigua, although there's more rain in the summer. And green—always so achingly, so beautifully green. If I had dreamed up the place, I couldn't have done it better.

There was a downside, however. Once upon a time, Antigua was the country's capital. Then a devastating earthquake in 1773 killed a large percentage of the population and left many of the beautiful churches, government structures, and houses in ruins; the capital was moved to Guatemala City. While many structures in Antigua were rebuilt, to this day numerous buildings remain as they've been left in the wake of nature's wrath, silent reminders of the city's past and the ever-present threat of more destruction. A 1976 earthquake killed more than 20,000 Guatemalans, wiping out entire villages in the mountainous areas, although the impact in Antigua was minimal.

There's nothing attractive about a deadly earthquake—but there's something undeniably picturesque, at this remove in time, about Antigua's eighteenth-century ruins. Catherine Morland, the heroine of Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, would have adored exploring them. In Austen's day wealthy Brits had a real taste for crumbling monasteries and shattered battlements, a fad Austen pokes fun at in her Gothic parody. Antigua is full of intriguing ruins of churches, convents, and other structures that time and abundant greenery have woven into the fabric of the city's present life, among the stuccoed and brightly painted houses.

The busy Parque Central is one of the prettiest, most inviting town squares I've seen. The climate allows for lush trees and flowers year-round, and attractive buildings frame the park on four sides, one of which is occupied entirely by police administrative offices. Upon inspection, the impressive colonial façade of the police station proves to be just that—a façade. View the building from the side and you'll discover that it gives way, two rooms deep, to colossal piles of rubble, the remains of its pre-earthquake stature. From this base, roving police maintain order to the point of telling people to keep their weary feet off the numerous benches.

As we settled by the central fountain for some people watching, a girl of seventeen or eighteen approached Nora with a bright smile of recognition on her pretty face. She was dressed in the universal teen costume of T-shirt and jeans. While she had the warm, dark complexion of many Guatemalans, the shape of her eyes and the lines of her cheekbones were somehow distinctive. Middle Eastern? After a noisy exchange of kisses and greetings, she and Nora began speaking at a pace Nora couldn't follow. Then, with a parting kiss and a wave, the girl tripped off.

Nora, who's got four children, sighed like only a mother can. I had to ask: "Where is she from?"

"Turkey," answered Nora. "She was at *La Escuela* for a while. She moved here on her own because she didn't like her home, but she's had some troubles."

"Are her parents here? Other relatives or friends?" No and no.

Wow. There I was thinking myself quite the adventurer for cutting loose in Latin America for a whole year, although with a university post awaiting at home—and here was a girl less than half my age cutting loose indefinitely, picking up and saying, "The heck with Turkey, how about Guatemala?" I looked around the park at the local girls in braids and beautifully embroidered clothing, people once referred to as "Indians" but now, more respectfully (and accurately) as indigenous. Their roots were in place well before the Spaniards showed up.

How inconceivable this idea would be to most of them, to disengage from a tightly knit family and try one's fortune in an alien country. According to what I'd learned at *La Escuela*, they would no more consider this than Austen herself would have. I'd spoken with some young indigenous women on my

first visit who couldn't grasp why I'd chosen to travel alone. "But your *family*? How can you leave your *family*?" they'd repeated, clearly distressed on my behalf, as if I'd somehow stepped out of my hotel without my head on my shoulders.

Austen traveled very little in her lifetime—a move from her birthplace of Steventon to Bath, some beach vacations to Lyme Regis, a few trips to London—and always accompanied by family. Americans are so enamored of “finding ourselves” that it's hard to imagine life in a culture where your place, *who* you are, is defined first and foremost by family. What would it be like never to feel driven to ask the questions that keep American therapists busy? To have a true and profound sense of belonging? You can find close communities in the States, but these days you have to look hard.

Maybe Austen would translate just fine for Antiguans. Maybe they'd be able to understand her better than a restless traveler like me or that high-spirited young girl disappearing through the crowd in the Parque Central.

Monday morning dawned—back to school! I was always one of those nerds who looked forward to school starting, to breaking in crisp new notebooks, color-coded by subject, to using shiny new pens. I remember with vivid intensity the childhood pleasure of stepping back into the classroom after a summer of sunburns and roughhousing. Returning to *La Escuela* that July morning felt the same. I saw the motivated morning bustle, checking to find which cubicle I'd been assigned, which teacher.

If you seriously want to learn another language and can pull together the cash, attend an immersion school with one-on-one instruction. Finding a pretty one, while you're at it, is easy to do in Antigua since most have outdoor classrooms. The grounds at *La Escuela* were idyllic. Neat cement paths wound between the beds of well-tended flowers and bushes that separated the three long rows of outdoor study cubicles. At capacity, the school accommodated dozens of students, but the layout and the semiencllosed cubicles allowed for the sense of privacy you find in a well-designed restaurant. The school was enchanting—nothing like fresh air and flowers to make a classroom more pleasant.

As for teachers, I'd requested Luis, a man known for both his profound love of literature and his amiable, especially toward women. I'd seen him during my initial five-week visit back in the winter but had never spoken to him. Unlike most of the teachers at *La Escuela*, Luis, who was fiftyish, simply didn't look friendly. His expressions were sharp, his features and the tone of his voice were sharp, the lines of his slender body, sharp, and his mind, as I came to see over the course of the week, sharpest of all. When students and teachers would gather for coffee breaks, he tended to hang back and watch the others—and I was intrigued.

Thinking about Luis's reputation led me to remember how one of Austen's neighbors compared Jane to a fireplace poker: an ever-present part of the furnishings, silent, stiff and upright, sharp and dangerous. This doesn't exactly square, however, with the many descriptions by Austen's nieces and by friends who found her pleasant and fun. In all likelihood the comparison to a poker had less to do with Austen being a cold bit of hardware than with the neighbor in question feeling roundly and soundly jabbed by Austen's now-famous wit.

A colleague from my university who'd already studied with Luis had asked me to bring him half

dozen novels in English as a gift. Luis eyed the stack I placed on the desk between us with thinly concealed desire as I introduced myself. Clearly he was a book person to the core, no doubt thinking, “Mary, mother of God, why can’t I run home with these books right now? Why must I work for my living?” Every time I hear about somebody who wins a never-work-again sum in the lottery but keeps his or her day job I think, *not* a book person.

I don’t fear death—I fear dying before I’ve read Dickens end to end.

Luis posed some standard questions and I worked through the answers: born in Pennsylvania, job in California, two brothers, one sister, mother living, father passed away. It was both a polite routine and a way for him to gauge my level in Spanish.

“You have children?” he asked.

“I’ve got nieces and nephews. That’s enough for me.”

This earned me my first real smile from Luis, a confirmed bachelor in a child-loving land. “We don’t all need kids,” he nodded. When I explained about the Austen reading group, he looked more interested still.

“Who’s in your group?”

“Teachers from this school,” I explained. “Nora, Élida, Mercedes, and two other women.” At that point, I’d not yet met the other friends Nora had invited (or corralled?) to join. “Ani and Flor, I think.”

“Which Mercedes?” Luis pursued, his eyes narrowing. “The fat one?”

Now, I knew one Mercedes at the school *was* bigger than the other but neither was fat. I maintained eye contact, unapologetic for his question, watchful for my response.

I decided on a frontal assault. “What a question! She’s not fat. Don’t you like her?”

A little smile wrinkled one side of his lips and he shifted tack. “I’d be very curious to know how your group goes with those women.”

I got the distinct impression from his tone that he wasn’t so sure they’d say much of interest. Surprised myself that they *would*, I considered inviting him to join us. I had extra copies of *Orgullo y Prejuicio*. No doubt he could wolf it down fast, and I would love to know what such a widely read man would think of Austen.

Then my better judgment kicked in.

Just like the physical ruins in back of the administrative building on the Parque Central, that school had an ugly pile of rubble behind the façade in the form of the male/female relations. Various female teachers had let me know on my first visit that they feel disrespected by their male colleagues, and salary inequities were a big issue.

While I empathized, I wouldn’t allow gender politics to prevent me from working with a teacher who interested me, and Luis interested me. But I also couldn’t allow the Austen group to implode by inviting him and his incendiary jibes to join us. The ladies, I felt sure, would be outraged.

“I’ve got an extra copy of the book,” I offered. I could discuss Austen with him, if he’d like, independent of the main group. “I brought a film version, too. Do you think they’d let us watch it here?”

For a teacher who spends seven hours a day, five days a week across a desk from foreigners, butchering his beautiful mother tongue, watching a film could be a welcome change. We were due for

a coffee break anyway, so we made arrangements. Wednesday, any and all interested parties could join us in the main office of *La Escuela* to see Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, dubbed in Spanish, with Keira Knightley as Lizzy Bennet and Matthew Macfadyen as Mr. Darcy.

As we resumed our conversation, refreshed with caffeine, Luis asked me about Austen and her novels. Lapsing in English was a serious no-no, but given the lack of subtlety in my Spanish, I quickly snarled up trying to show why Austen was worth discussing in Guatemala and elsewhere in Latin America. Not wanting to spoil *Pride and Prejudice* for him, I launched into a description of *Emma*.

"Emma's a rich girl, you see? And she's a, a"—drat, "matchmaker" was not in my Spanish vocabulary—"a person who finds husbands and wives for other people to marry." A simple statement can drag out endlessly as you pile up ten or twelve words you do know to substitute for the one you *don't*. "She's got a young friend, well, who's not really a friend because she's poor, but Emma wants to find a husband for her anyway, because that's the way she is, and when she finds a man who can be her husband, a husband for the friend, that man falls in love with her instead. With Emma."

Wow—stripped down to the plot, this sounds pretty sappy! "It's not just about what she says in the novel, it's the way she says it," I added, struggling to ignite some interest in Luis's critical eyes. "It's the way she sees things, the way she says them, it's her, her...*voice*."

It's not about the plots, I wanted to cry out. It's about the subtle commentary of the narrative perspective, the cutting inflections, the linguistic smirks! It's about those twists of the satiric knife that you can read right past unless you're really attentive—it's about the ostensibly innocent reporting of dialogue that nonetheless directs how we interpret that dialogue through the seamlessly clever framing. All of this I wanted to say, and so much more.

"*Su voz*." In Spanish, this was all that came out. "Her voice."

What a long way I had to go. There was so much I wanted to tell Luis about Austen, all of it trapped in my head in English and unable to make its way out along the extremely thin, badly rutted pathway my Spanish provided at the moment between my thoughts and my speech. Maddening!

I needed a nap. Spanish made my brain hurt.

I've already mentioned how beautiful Antigua is architecturally, but what makes it the loveliest place I'd ever been is that the city is completely ringed by green mountains, among which are two enormous volcanoes. Real live volcanoes! Well, one of them is live, anyway—the other, dormant.

Volcán Agua, the dormant one, is visible from any point in Antigua, a city without skyscrapers. Even my mother—the most directionally challenged person I know, bless her heart—could steer to this landmark. Volcán Fuego is about the same height as Agua, but since its base is situated lower, it appears shorter. It wins back the edge, however, by periodically growling and belching threads of smoke. During my first stay, early one morning shortly after lessons had begun, Fuego let out a series of low rumbles. I had never heard a volcano before, but I didn't have to ask what that immense biblical sound was. Impressive. Very impressive. Involuntarily I shot to my feet as had every other student in sight. The teachers, volcano veterans, smiled and kept their seats.

When I returned for my second visit, I'd requested a room with a view of Volcán Agua. After

checking in, I'd mentioned my Austen project to Roberto, the hotel manager. He was interested, since he'd been a high school teacher before going into the hospitality business. But when I mentioned that I also wanted to learn about his country's literature, to see if Guatemala had its own Austen, he lit up like a pinball machine.

"We've got so many great writers! Come, come here!" Warm and open, Guatemalans pretty much lack most Americans' shyness about touching strangers. Roberto seized my arm and hauled me to a table, patting his pockets with his free hand in search of a pen. "These are authors you'll like. You'll learn about Guatemala from their books." His eyes were full of the pleasure one booklover takes in sharing recommendations with another.

On the back of my flight itinerary, he wrote down several names, among them José Milla and Ana María Rodas (and if you know Guatemalan literature and are wondering about Miguel Asturias, rest assured; we'll get to him). "You won't have any trouble finding these authors here," he added.

Antigua has several bookstores on the main square and others near The Arch, a beautiful Spanish colonial structure that spans one of the streets bordering the cathedral La Merced. A signature landmark, The Arch was left standing—some say, miraculously—after the 1773 and 1976 earthquakes. There are a few coffee shops that allow people to swap books in English, a common practice in cities frequented by *gringos y gringas*, but finding Spanish books in such places is hit or miss. There's also an enticing used book fair on Fridays and weekends outside of the buildings that line the front of the Parque Central.

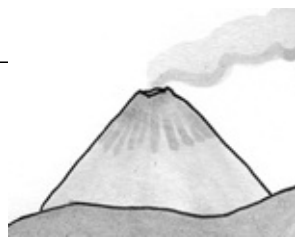
Of the three authors on the list, José Milla, whom Nora and Élide had also recommended, was the most famous. Milla, born in 1822, came up most often when I asked Guatemalans about classic writers. I decided to read *Historia de un Pepe* when Roberto told me how he and his boyhood classmates had to recite it aloud in school, round robin. In the United States, school kids who'd rather be anywhere but in class are tormented with *Pride and Prejudice* or *Oliver Twist*—in Guatemala, with *Historia de un Pepe*.

Milla is a grand painter of tableaux, dramatic and unforgettable; reading him made me aware that I can rarely picture specific static images from Austen. Her work for me represents constant, typical motion—gentle, motion—the passage of a polite visit, a fluid exchange of dialogue, the unfolding of ideas in the mind of a protagonist. Stylistically, Milla is more of a Sir Walter Scott. Scott himself acknowledged the contrast between his style and Austen's after her death:

That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The Big Bow-wow strain I can do myself like any now going; but the exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting, from the truth of the description and sentiment, is denied to me. What a pity such a gifted creature died so early!

A pity, indeed—although as history would have it, another famous writer came along a bit later to say, "It seems a great pity that they allowed her to die a natural death."

But that's a story for later.



Chapter Two

The day for our school viewing of *Orgullo y Prejuicio* rolled around quickly. One of the administrators surrendered his office, and we set up our impromptu cinema. *Pride and Prejudice* is such familiar ground for Austen lovers that it brings back a certain thrill to view the movie with people who don't know if Lizzy and Darcy will manage to get together. When I saw the Knightley/MacFadyen version in the theater in California, I was seated behind two men and a woman in their fifties who could have been any of my more colorful Pennsylvania relatives or the grown-up equivalent of the fist-fightin' rednecks from my high school. The three treated the outing like a trip to a Steelers game, shouting encouragement and insults at the appropriate spots. I'm usually the first person to shush noisy viewers, but it was worth the ticket price to hear them respond to the story with such unreserved gusto.

"Who the hell does he think he is?!" barked the woman when Darcy snubs Lizzy at the dance.

"Ha! Guess she told you, buddy!" hooted one of the men when Lizzy takes him down a peg or two a few scenes later.

Every major plot twist prompted noisy feedback. "Oh yeah, Missy," cried the woman after Bingley has proposed to Jane and Lizzy sits outside, contemplating the proposal she rejected. "Yeah, that's right. Now you know you *blew it!*"

Imagine the surprise of all three when Darcy reappears to give it one more try—they were so happy they clapped and hollered. I felt like hugging them.

The teachers and students who clustered around the TV in *La Escuela* weren't quite so vocal, but they were clearly caught up in the Lizzy/Darcy battle. One of the teachers blurted out, "Ay, no, no!" in distress when Lizzy rejects Darcy and another actually flung her hands up and cried, "Al fin, al fin!"—"Finally!"—when Darcy makes his dramatic reappearance at the conclusion. Male and female alike had writhed in agony at Mrs. Bennet's machinations, the teachers elbowing each other to make comments in rapid Spanish that I couldn't entirely follow, beyond the sense that they'd seen her kind around Antigua. Mrs. Bennet translates particularly well across cultures, as anybody knows who has seen the mother dance down the steps in Gurinder Chadha's fabulous Bollywood adaptation *Bride and Prejudice*.

After the viewing, Luis and I made our way back along the garden path and sat down to debrief. "Bien hecha," he began. "Well made. Really a beautiful film." But the utter shamelessness of Lydia's behavior came under his fire, as well as her lack of repentance for the landslide of trouble her elopement caused. My hackles went up over the notion that Lydia was shameless when Wickham was the bigger wanker, for my money. But then Luis reached for a loose page of the meticulous notes he kept during each of our conversations and wrote down two words: *una mulada* and *una cabronada*.

“Austen’s clearly interested in depicting shades of bad behavior,” he explained, “not in drawing black-and-white portraits. As for this pair, they both ran off, but Lydia went off expecting to get married, and Wickham went off expecting to get laid. Her behavior was *una mulada* but his was *una cabronada*.”

There’s no way to translate these words exactly, but for starters, *una mula* is a mule and *una cabronada* a goat. The basic idea is that Lydia behaved like a stubborn mule, acting without a sense for the consequences, but Wickham behaved like a horny goat, with deliberate malice. One of the fun features of Spanish that English lacks is the capacity to create nouns that express behaviors out of other nouns or verbs. So, a dog is *un perro*, and behaving like a dog to somebody (see how many words that takes?) is *una perrada*. Behaving like *un burro* (donkey) translates into *una burrada* and *un cochino* (pig), *una cochinada*.

“Very interesting, how the casting was handled,” Luis continued. “There’s nothing in the novel about Collins being short, but his height immediately conveys how small he is in character. A film can never provide the subtlety of characterization you find in a great book—and now that I’m reading it, I can see how subtle Austen is—but good casting helps.”

As I agreed, he added, “Seeing a depiction of women’s lives from that period was interesting. What do you think about the situation of women in Guatemala?” He leaned back against his chair and crossed his arms, watchful.

I could hardly think of a more loaded question from a man who hadn’t exactly displayed the best attitude toward his female colleagues. I could also feel that late afternoon headache settling in, the one I got most days from struggling through hours of Spanish conversation.

Hell, I’m paying for this, I thought, so I went the easy route. “What do *you* think of their lives?”

The wry tilt of an eyebrow showed that he knew a dodge when he heard it, but he obliged me. “We got our independence from Spain in 1821.” He leaned forward and wrote the date on our page of notes for that day, full on both sides with words, phrases, a few random sketches. “Where are Guatemalan women now?” He wrote another date: 1822. “Maids—that’s what their parents raise them to be: maids. They’re raised to do chores, not to use their minds.”

Fascinating. A man so harsh on individual women nonetheless had a bead on what academics typically call “social construction.” The problem is not women *per se*; it’s how women are raised. But Nora and Érida and their friends were obviously capable of using their minds, whatever social pressure might have tried to stop them from doing so, however much of their time was eaten up by “women’s work.”

Austen wasn’t raised the same way as her brothers. She and her sister Cassandra only received about two years of formal education, while older brothers James and Henry were sent to Oxford. Jane begrudged them a privilege her gender prohibited, no real trace of this sentiment surviving. Disappointingly for scandal-seeking biographers, Austen’s family seems to have been a happy one despite the inequities notwithstanding. Austen’s determination to see her works in print bore fruit not only because her family supported her efforts but also because of her own determination not to let her talent go to waste, despite the constraints of her era.

Luis remained poised for my response. Judging from his expression, he was interested in knowing more than whether I could pull the words together in Spanish. Somehow I hadn’t seen myself getting

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