Movie Review: 'The Jane Austen Book Club'

by David_Elliott

Chick flick, a term sadly unknown to Jane Austen, gets some new plumage in "The Jane Austen Book Club," Robin Swicord's film of the hit novel by Karen Joy Fowler.

'THE JANE AUSTEN BOOK CLUB' - Prudie (Emily Blunt) finds that Jane Austen makes a difference for her troubled marriage to Dean (Marc Blucas) in 'The Jane Austen Book Club.' CNS Photo courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) If you call Austen's work "chick-lit," please restrict yourself to a diet of literary Chiclets. The Sacramento gals who gather to read one Austen novel a month are steeped in fictions they take very seriously. The one male, Grigg (Hugh Dancy), is an "Austen virgin" who comes through with some discerning comments.

More honor-bound to Fowler than Austen, Swicord (who adapted) uses Austen as a minor plot asset and key

linkage device for soaped lives. There's a continuous rinse cycle of emotive biz, lacking Austen's wit and elegant social layering but rich in sitcom payoffs, meet-cutes, ditherings of desire, lunch-chat depth and dissing ("sexually altered bitch" - not exactly Austen gone contempo).

Will sparky Bernadette (Kathy Baker) flirt wryly into a seventh marriage? Can elite dog-breeder Jocelyn (Maria Bello) unlimber toward boyishly manly Grigg? Will maritally agonized teacher Prudie (Emily Blunt, in the most nuanced performance) find an Austen key to unlock her stifled husband, or opt for a tempting hunk?

And so on, including spry work by Dancy, Maggie Grace, Amy Brenneman, plus a pitifully guilty husband into which Jimmy Smits squeezes his bulk. It's all jauntily joined and sitcomically brisk. Elements: skydiving, dogs, a salute to science-fiction, a nip of "Brigadoon," a dreary little role for Lynn Redgrave, even a lesbian lass whose mother tries to match with sexy but rightly fuddled Grigg.

Austen may have lessons for our time, but remains very much of her time, which is the core appeal of her classically subtle, romantic sobriety. We escape into her cadenced dance of lives, we don't drag her into our mosh pit. To do that is to find a dizzy blur of superficialities, like this movie.

Guys, its your turn. "The Mickey Spillane Book Club" will be filmed soon. David Mamet will adapt, and Michael Madsen is now sparring with Billy Bob Thornton over who gets to captain "the feisty revels."

A Sony Pictures Classics release. Director, adapter: Robin Swicord. Cast: Kathy Baker, Hugh Dancy, Maria Bello, Emily Blunt, Jimmy Smits, Amy Brenneman, Lynn Redgrave. Running time: 1 hour, 46 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

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