



AN INTERVIEW WITH LUCY WORSLEY

Article Author:

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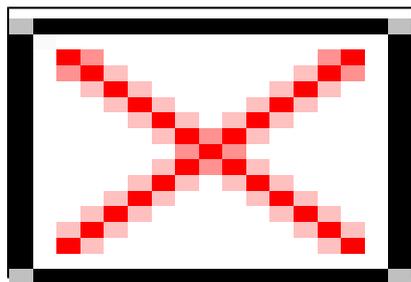
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Lucy Worsley talks about **The Austen Girls**, her new novel for young people.

Lucy Worsley talks to **Caroline Sanderson** for **Books for Keeps** about her new book **The Austen Girls** and its lessons for today's young women.

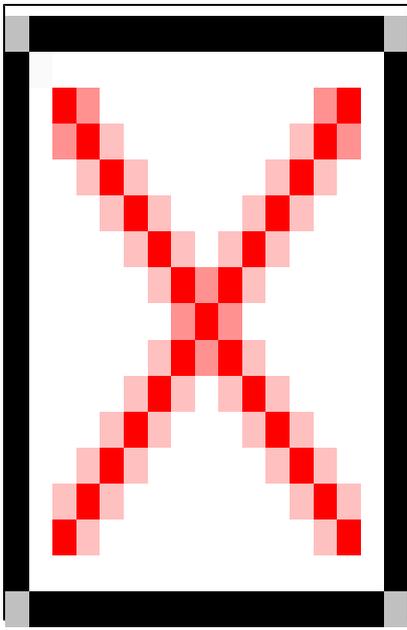
It is 1809 and cousins Fanny and Anna Austen have just been launched onto the ruthless Regency marriage market. But luckily their mysteriously wealthy Aunt Jane is on hand to help them carve their own paths.



Such is the premise of **The Austen Girls**, Lucy Worsley's fourth historical novel for teenagers. In it she imagines the joys, conflicts and dramas in the lives of Jane Austen's two eldest nieces - real-life cousins Anna and Fanny - as they are launched into society at 16, an age at which they are deemed old enough to marry; advantageously and as soon as possible. It's a pacy, delightful and poignant read, rich in historical colour as you would expect from its renowned historian author, but also with plenty of resonance for the young women of today.

When we speak on the phone, Lucy reveals that it was the research for her 2017 book for adults, **Jane Austen at Home** - an account of Austen's life told through the lens of the houses she lived in - which sparked the idea for **The Austen Girls**. 'I came across the nieces because Jane's relationship with them was so important to her: she took the role of mentor and stand-in mother for both of them. And I loved the dynamics between Anna and Fanny; they were close but had a love-hate relationship. I thought: these two are the heroines of a novel?.'

Her most abiding memory of Jane Austen's novels is of reading them while doing her finals at university. 'I went through all of them from start to finish as an antidote to revising: they are perfect in times of stress. So that's when I got increasingly drawn into Jane Austen's world?. Later, Lucy's intimate knowledge of the novels highlighted fascinating parallels between the lives of Jane's nieces, snippets of which appear in her letters, and the plots of her novels. 'These real-life young women have so much in common with characters like Catherine Morland in **Northanger Abbey** who has to make her way through the marriage market. Anna and Fanny seemed to me like prototypes for Jane Austen's own fictional heroines. So there were lots of interesting dynamics to work with for a novel of my own, including the fact that Anna and Fanny's characters and circumstances were very different. Fanny had all the advantages of the big House and the rich Daddy, while Anna came from - it's wrong to say a poor family - but a family who experienced genteel poverty and struggled to keep up appearances?.'



Set chiefly at Godmersham Park, the real-life Kent home of Jane Austen's brother, Edward, **The Austen Girls** follows Anna and Fanny as they attend their first balls and size up their first suitors. As well as the will-she, won't-she intrigue surrounding Anna and Fanny's marriage plots, **The Austen Girls** is also a detective novel, in which Fanny and her aunt Jane try to solve the crime with which one of Fanny's admirers, Godmersham curate Mr Drummer is accused. Harshly assumed guilty until proven innocent, he is sent to a House of Correction for stealing a pair of gloves.

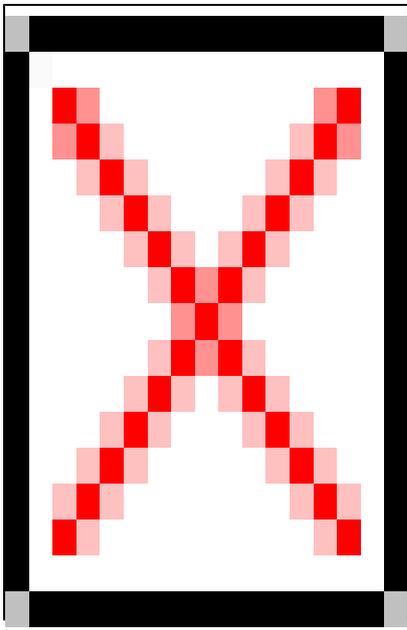
I ask Lucy why she wanted to include this mystery element in her novel. "Oh, because I love detective stories and I wanted Jane Austen to solve a crime. I've always thought she'd make a great detective, partly because her novel **Emma** is in itself a detective story, as PD James brilliantly pointed out".

What would she like contemporary readers to take away from Fanny and Anna's story? "Don't get married, girls!?", she says, jokingly. "No, it's a bit more subtle than that. Take your time, girls, and think about it carefully, perhaps". And in fact, events in the novel based on the real life stories of Anna and Fanny, intervene to overturn their early feelings about marriage.

But whilst **The Austen Girls** is a novel about negotiating the universal, timeless dilemmas that attend a young woman's first experience of falling in love, it is also a book which show there is another path: one that swerves marriage and child-bearing for a different kind of fulfilment. A path that Jane Austen herself took, choosing the life of a writer over that of a wife and mother. Lucy reflects this in **The Austen Girls**, when Fanny eventually discovers her aunt's secret occupation.

"It's why I feel drawn to Jane Austen, because she did have this secret life, writing novels that the people around her didn't know about", says Lucy. "She took this extraordinary risk not to follow the rules and to write books instead. The heart-breaking thing is that she died before she got the recognition she deserved. So I really wanted to celebrate her life as a writer in the story".

Two hundred years on, while much has changed for young women, **The Austen Girls** is still resonant of more contemporary pressures: to look the part, to embark on relationships. "I think one of the reasons that Jane Austen's novels are so popular around the world is that they're all about restrictions in society", says Lucy. "The idea of coming onto the marriage market is in one way deeply alien - everybody now knows that you shouldn't marry for money. But at the same time there are still many shallow money-orientated values in the world".



Having written her first children's book, [Eliza Rose](#) [3] for a slightly younger audience, Lucy's hope is that her early readers have stayed with her. In my dreams my ideal reader has been with me for my three previous books and is now well into puberty, just as Anna and Fanny are. And when she reads **The Austen Girls**, she'll think: my goodness, girls my age 200 years ago were having to make these life or death choices about whether to get married. What a relief I don't have to do that. I'd better exercise my 21st century right to choose instead!?

Caroline Sanderson is a non-fiction writer, editor and books journalist. Her books include a travel narrative, [A Rambling Fancy: in the footsteps of Jane Austen](#) [4]

[The Austen Girls](#) [5] is published by Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1526605450, £7.99 pbk

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