

FLIRTING WITH
*P*ride & *P*rejudice

*Fresh Perspectives
on the Original Chick-Lit Masterpiece*

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A Little Friendly Advice

Is There Such a Thing When It Comes to Relationships?

JENNIFER O'CONNELL



Do friends let friends marry losers? Jennifer O'Connell ponders the question as she compares Elizabeth's quandary in dealing with Charlotte's engagement to her own experiences with friends embarking on bad trips down the aisle.

W E'VE ALL SEEN THEM. The mismatched couple. Maybe he's an overbearing, egotistical bore who can spend hours talking about the merits of, well, himself. Maybe she's putting in sixty-hour weeks while he's at home breaking in the La-Z-Boy, demonstrating his ability to deftly juggle both the remote control and a cold bottle of Budweiser. Or maybe it's just a matter of chocolate versus vanilla. Ginger versus Mary Ann. Po-tay-to versus po-tah-to.

In any case, usually, way before the separation is announced and the words *irreconcilable differences* are typed in triplicate by some city hall clerk, there are signs.

When Elizabeth Bennet receives an offer of marriage from William Collins she recognizes him for the self-important kiss-up he is. And she's smart enough to gracefully refuse his kind offer, even if inside she's struggling not to laugh at the absurdity of his proposal. So, when

her best friend Charlotte comes to Elizabeth with the news of her own engagement—an engagement to one self-important kiss-up who, not three days before, was requesting her own hand in marriage—Elizabeth has a choice to make. Option number one: She can accept Charlotte's explanation that she's not getting any younger, that this may be her last shot at marriage, and wish her luck. Or, option number two: Elizabeth can do what it takes to keep her friend from making a huge mistake. After all, isn't that what friends are for?

We've all heard the horror stories that sound like urban lore. Cautionary tales of brides and grooms and their friends who looked the other way even as signs flashing "WARNING: TROUBLE AHEAD" were practically fighting for attention with the six-tiered fondant-iced wedding cake and heart-shaped ice sculpture. Ask a few friends if they knew, just *knew*, that a marriage wasn't going to work out before the couple even declared, "I do," and the stories will start pouring in. I asked, and that's exactly what happened:

- The maid of honor who, while talking with guests at the rehearsal dinner, was told by a relieved best man, "Finally, Greg is getting married. After his third engagement we were beginning to doubt whether anyone would end up marrying him." Um, three failed engagements? That was news to the maid of honor—and the bride. Still, the wedding was on.
- The friend who knew it wasn't going to last when she discovered the bride cheated on her fiancé—during the wedding rehearsal. Yet they still tied the knot the next morning, before three hundred of their closest family and friends.
- The bridesmaid who, along with the bride, the bridal party and thirty family and friends, waited for over an hour for the groom to show up at his own rehearsal. He'd had a great golf round going and couldn't fathom walking off the course before finishing all eighteen holes. And the next day, the wedding went off as planned.


In hindsight, these women knew they should have spoken up. But did any of these friends express their concerns before the stretch limo pulled up to take the blushing bride to the ceremony? Not a chance. Are any of these couples still married today? No way.

High-Class Problems



LAURA CALDWELL

When I was teaching *Pride and Prejudice* in a high school English class, one of my students said, “This whole book is about getting married; it’s just a Harlequin romance.” After I’d smacked him upside the head for being snotty about romance, I pointed out that marriage in the nineteenth century was a life or death matter. It was *different* then, I said. Laura Caldwell has a much better answer: it wasn’t that much different then. Relationship problems may be the problems of the privileged, but they’re still very real problems. Attention should be paid.

OKAY, I’M JUST GOING TO ADMIT IT. When the publishers of this book asked me to write an essay on Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, I nodded and murmured, “Hmm, interesting.” I pulled at an imaginary beard. I said I’d think about it. The tricky thing was, I’d never read *Pride and Prejudice*.

Sense and Sensibility, yes. And hey, I’d seen the *Sense* movie and *Emma* as well, but somehow *Pride and Prejudice* had escaped my Catholic high school curriculum and my Big Ten liberal arts education.

Nonetheless, I said yes to the project. A writer friend of mine recommended I read the CliffsNotes, claiming the book was too long. I did, and found them spare, to say the least. When I told my agent about the

anthology, she said, “Oh, just get the movie.” So I rented the BBC version, which, at six hours long, didn’t seem particularly economical in terms of time.

I still didn’t know what in the hell I would write about, so I trotted off to the library and borrowed five treatises on *Pride and Prejudice*, two written before 1930. After slogging through over a thousand pages of theoretical musings on Elizabeth Bennet and her crew, I realized I could have read the damned book twice over by this time. And the fact was, I was intrigued.

So finally, at last, I went to my little neighborhood bookstore, and there it was, in a nice, trim paperback with a hot pink cover. Somehow I doubted the original cover had been so sassy.

I opened the book and dug in. By now, Elizabeth, along with the Bennet family and their friends, was as familiar to me as my own friends and family. And thanks to my research, I knew more about them than a suspect under FBI investigation. I knew what they were *really* about. I knew, for example, that Elizabeth and Darcy’s marriage is the culmination of a journey toward social moderation. I knew that the wit embedded in the dialogue exposes their imperceptions and incongruities. I understood that Darcy represents heroism in his friendship with Bingley. And, of course, I realized that Elizabeth is an ironic and analytical spectator.

Yet within sixty pages my God-like perceptions of the characters floated away, and I moved on through the story as I would any other. As I did, I couldn’t help but notice a similarity between *Pride and Prejudice* and many chick-lit novels published today. This similarity is that, instead of discussing the political situation of the time, Austen deals instead with what my friends and I call “high-class problems.”

High-Class Problems, Defined

The term “high-class problems” was born for me one night while at a party with a friend who had spent the last year (and a hell of a lot of money) purchasing and rehabbing a house on Grand Cayman Island. She talked about the hurricane that had walloped the island only three days after she had moved in, and how she and her children had been evacuated and the house flooded.

My Firth Love



LANI DIANE RICH

For anyone who's seen the BBC miniseries of *Pride and Prejudice*—and is there anyone reading this book who hasn't?—Darcy is forever Colin Firth, the Man in the Damp Puffy Shirt. Lani Diane Rich is a fan with a weak grasp on reality, but a strong grasp on what makes Darcy firth in her heart.

March 5, 2005

M Hey, Diary. How ya been?

I realize I haven't written to you since the eighth grade, when I had that very intense crush on Andrew from my music class, remember? And I went on and on *and on* about he said this and I said that and he smiled at me and I wanted to throw up and does he like me or does he *like* like me? God. It's amazing you didn't corporealize yourself and kill me then.

Thank you for that, by the way.

I'd like to say not a lot has happened since then, tell you it's been a boring and colorless life, but I think we both know that's not true. I'm

staring down the barrelhead of thirty-four as we speak. I graduated high school, went to college, got married, had kids. I've worked as a nanny, a television producer and a pyrotechnician. (Not in that order.) I lived in Alaska for a while. I'm a novelist now, and I teach part-time at the local university. I don't know what happened to Andrew. I heard his brother was dating a supermodel for a while, though.

Anyway, I'm coming to you now because something has happened to me that hasn't happened since around the last time you saw me, so I thought I'd see if you could help.

I have a crush. A bad one. On a man who doesn't exist. And if he did exist, he would have died, oh, some 150 years ago.

It's all very complicated. More later.

March 10, 2005

Sorry these entries are short. My daughters are three and five, so I have to grab these moments when I can. Right now, I'm writing at the kitchen table as my youngest tries to ask me a question while chewing simultaneously on two pieces of toast. She's inherited her mother's grace, poor thing.

Anyway, back to the crush. Sorry to shift gears so fast, but we both know why we're here. I mean, if I wanted to discuss the existential angst of motherhood I'd be writing in a journal. Diaries are for the down and dirty, the stuff you don't want people to ever find out about you. Journals are the things you leave open around the house, hoping a literary agent will wander in, read it and declare you the next genius of your age.

So let's quit pretending, shall we? This crush. I was a little dishonest with you. The crush isn't *exactly* on Darcy. (We both knew who I was talking about. I mean, come on. It was either Darcy or Spike from *Buffy* and... okay, well, I'm riding that train, too, but that's another discussion entirely.)

My point is, like pretty much every woman between the ages of fourteen and dead, I read *Pride and Prejudice* sometime in the high school era and fell instantly in love with Darcy. His strength. His integrity. His quickness to jump to the aid of the woman he loves, defending her in secret, expecting nothing in return for his heroism and gallantry.

Bennets and Bingleys and Bitches. Oh My!



ERIN DAILEY

You've taken the *Cosmo* quiz to find out if you and your mate relate. Now take Erin Dailey's quiz and find out who you'd be if fate dropped you into the Meryton Assembly. Hint: Watch out for those Bs.

OH, THE BENNETS AND THE BINGLEYS. Aren't they just the most delightful group of ... well ... annoying and infuriating women you've ever come across in a work of fiction? The only saving grace is Elizabeth, and even she is somewhat hindered by the era within which she exists. How many times have you wished that at the precise moment the priggish Darcy generously bestows his good proposal upon Lizzy she would just up and smack him across the head with one of the fireplace pokers? But Lizzy ... she, at least, is likeable. I mean, Jane's too nice, the Bingleys are too mean, Lydia's too silly, Mary's too serious and Kitty's ... too ... bronchial? I don't know. They're all too ... girly for my tastes. Seriously. Are any of the ladies of Hertfordshire even remotely relatable? Can we see even a little bit of ourselves in any one of them? In the triumvirate of Lizzy, Jane and Caroline, can you find one iota of self-identification? Could you be one of them? Go on and ask yourself.

Which Lady Are You?

You just found out the guy you have your eye on has recently moved into a place across town. What do you do?

- A. Don a frilly dress, copy the makeup off the model in the Lancôme ad, stroke for stroke, leave your coat behind because it makes you look fat, then head out into the rain to take two cabs, a bus and a train, only to arrive soaking wet and desperately ill, but who cares because your guy is just the sweetest and bestest guy on the whole planet!
- B. Tell your friend's sister's friend to tell her brother that you certainly DON'T have your eye on the guy and that you resent the implication that you DO and if everyone would be so kind as to not mention his name ever AGAIN, you'd very much appreciate it because he is tacky and hairy and far, far beneath you.
- C. Raise an eyebrow at the pouring rain, turn on BBC America, pour yourself a glass of wine and figure that if the rain stops before you've finished the bottle, you'll call a cab and head on over. If it doesn't, well, then at least you'll have a good buzz before Monty Python comes on.

There's a huge formal ball being given in honor of some hotshot foreign bigwig. Anyone who's anyone is going and so are you. Where will you be for most of the event?

- A. Out on the dance floor, spinning your skirts, laughing your head off at the music, batting your eyelashes at your partner and generally being the belle of the ball. What use is beauty if you can't show it off once in a while?
- B. Gathered with your gaggle of gal pals by the bar, commenting on every last nose job and bad hairline in the place. Who has time to dance when there are so many people to disapprove of? And has anyone SEEN Amanda Reardon's lips lately? Girlfriend looks like she accidentally pumped her mouth full of helium. What a loser!
- C. Over in the corner, trading jibes with some of the politicians and diplomats who seem to think that just because you have boobs, you

Pride and Prejudice: The Reality Show

JOYCE MILLMAN



Nobody suffers like Elizabeth Bennet. In fact, one might wonder how her plight could possibly be worse as she watches her life come unraveled under the pitiless eyes of stiff-necked society. Well, wonder no more. Joyce Millman knows: get out the sheep's eyeballs and let the cameras roll.

*A*NNOUNCER: You've seen *The Bachelor*. You've seen *Survivor*. You've seen *Joe Millionaire*, but you won't admit it. Now, from the creators of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Fear Factor*, comes a reality show that has as much romance, backstabbing and exhibitionism as those other shows—but with British accents, so you don't have to be embarrassed about watching it! *American Idol*'s Ryan Seacrest hosts . . . *Pride and Prejudice!*

Week One

[A pretty young woman in a Regency-era gown and bonnet strolls in a country garden.]

RYAN SEACREST: [Voiceover] Bachelorette Elizabeth Bennet, age not above one-and-twenty, has a quick mind, a lively manner and a



Flirting with Pride and Prejudice

pleasing appearance. But she's no society heiress, so her marriage prospects are looking dim. Lizzy's really going to have to work that lively manner if she wants to hook up with somebody rich and hot. Otherwise, her mom will marry her off to the first boring old dude who'll have her.

MRS. BENNET: [*To the camera*] I do not know what to do about Lizzy. She is so contrary! I am always telling her, "Lizzy, put down that book; no husband wants a wife who can read!" Am I not always telling her that, Mr. Bennet?

MR. BENNET: [*Dryly*] Lizzy is a horrid girl.

MRS. BENNET: [*To the camera*] Now, my eldest daughter, Jane, is much more obedient. And so agreeably weak and pale! I am teaching her how to swoon. "Jane," I told her, "No gentleman can resist a lady when she's unconscious!" She will be in top swooning form by the time we meet Mr. Bingley, our new neighbor from the estate at Netherfield. Yes, he is unmarried! And he has an income of five thousand a year, so he must be in want of a wife! [*Shouts up the staircase*] Jane! It's time for your beauty regimen! Come quickly, the leeches are restless!

Week Two

[*The five Bennet sisters happily hug each other.*]

SEACREST: [*Voiceover*] There is excitement at Longbourn! Bachelorettes Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty and Lydia have just learned that Mr. Bingley will be attending the upcoming dance at the Assembly Rooms. And he's bringing his posse!

MRS. BENNET: [*To Mr. Bennet*] I do hope that Lizzy can keep her contrary opinions to herself and not spoil Jane's chances with Mr. Bingley! Oh, husband, the anticipation of the dance has played harshly upon my nerves! I must take to my bed! I shall be indisposed for the rest of the day.

MR. BENNET: [*Dryly*] Trouble yourself not, my dear. I have urgent business to attend to in my study. [*Slips a copy of Naughty Wench magazine inside his waistcoat*]

ELIZABETH: [*To the camera, in a lively manner*] I am contrary, this is

true! I refuse to stoop to swooning and flattery. I shall go to the dance and survey the bachelors, but looks and money do not sway me. I am far too discerning to let defects of character pass unnoticed. And of all defects, the most odious is pride! Depend upon it, I would never marry a proud man, even if he were master of the biggest estate in the county! Even if he were as handsome as Colin Firth! Even if he were Colin Firth himself, I would not yield! [*Reflects a moment*] Does anybody know if Colin Firth is married?

[*The Assembly Rooms. Young women and men are dancing in a line or engaged in conversation. Lydia Bennet, the bosomy fifteen-year-old bachelorette, is surrounded by soldiers of the _____ shire regiment. She is chugging punch.*]

SEACREST: [*Voiceover*] The big night is here and hook-ups are in the air! [*Shot of Bingley gazing starry-eyed at demure Jane*] Well, it looks like Jane has Bingley—or should that be *Bling-ley?*—on the line and she's reeling him in! Is that . . . ? Yes, it appears the wealthy bachelor from Netherfield is offering her a rose!

BINGLEY: Jane, I would like to form an attachment with you. Will you accept this rose?

JANE: Yes. Oh, I feel faint. . . . [*Thud*]

SEACREST: [*Voiceover*] Meanwhile, all eyes are on Bingley's friend, Mr. Darcy, a handsome but haughty bachelor who bears a striking resemblance to Colin Firth. Darcy is an even better catch than Bingley! He has an income of ten thousand pounds a year and is master of Pemberley, an estate so huge a team of surveyors was sent to map it and was never heard from again. Let's listen in on the hidden microphone as the two bachelors compare notes.

BINGLEY: Dude, why are you not dancing? The place is crawling with foxes!

DARCY: Hmmmph. There is no one here foxy or respectable enough to dance with. They are all beneath me.

BINGLEY: What about Jane's sister Elizabeth? I wouldn't mind her beneath *me!* [*Giggles*]

DARCY: [*Turns to look, shrugs*] Eh. She's okay. Look, Bingley, I do not begrudge you some fun with Jane Bennet. But, good God, man, the family is trailer trash! The daughters are plain country girls of no