

Araştırma Makalesi/Research Article

READING JANE AUSTEN: JOURNEYS OF SELF-DISCOVERY IN *THE JANE AUSTEN BOOK CLUB**

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ABSTRACT: Building on the insights offered by Reader-Response theory that foregrounds the role of the reader in the creation of meaning, this article will examine ways in which the act of reading is portrayed as a profoundly transformative, therapeutic and mind-enlarging activity in *The Jane Austen Book Club*. The novel makes the point that the act of reading encourages readers to discover different/hitherto unknown aspects of themselves and to grow as individuals. On the other hand, it also explores ways in which sharing the reading experience with others and exchanging opinions on the universal themes examined in Jane Austen's works prove to be a liberating and enriching experience for the members of the book club. In what follows, I will first offer a brief discussion of Reader-Response theory and then examine the novel in the light of these ideas. In doing that, my aim is to show how each reader in the novel creates his or her meaning through a transaction with the text based on personal associations. My reading of the novel will thus focus on what each book club reader brings to the novels along with the various perspectives through which the novels can be examined.

Keywords: Reading, meaning in the text, reader-response theory, *The Jane Austen Book Club*, Karen Jay Fowler, Jane Austen.

JANE AUSTEN OKUMAK: *JANE AUSTEN KİTAP KULÜBÜ* ROMANINDA KENDİNİ KEŞİF YOLCULUKLARI

ÖZ: Bu makalenin amacı, anlamın yaratımında okuyucunun rolüne vurgu yapan okur-tepkisi kuramından yola çıkarak okuma eyleminin dönüştürücü, iyileştirici ve zihin açıcı bir eylem olarak tasvir edildiği *Jane Austen Kitap Kulübü* kitabını incelemektir. Bu roman okuma eyleminin insanları kendilerinde daha önce farketmedikleri/gizli kalmış yönlerini keşfetmeye cesaretlendirerek, okuyucuların bireysel gelişimlerine olan katkısına dikkat çeker. Bunun yanı sıra, kitap kulübü üyelerinin okuma tecrübelerini birbirleriyle paylaşmalarının ve Jane Austen'ın eserlerinde işlediği evrensel temalarla ilgili görüş alışverişlerinin onlar için nasıl özgürleştirici ve zenginleştirici bir tecrübe olduğunu yansıtır. Makalenin başında kısaca okur-tepkisi kuramına değinilir ve roman bu düşünceler çerçevesinde incelenir. Buradaki amaç, romandaki her okurun kişisel tecrübeleri doğrultusunda metne ne şekilde öznel anlamlar yüklediklerini göstermektir. Sonuç olarak bu roman incelemesi, her bir kulüp üyesinin romana

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neler kattığını tespit ederken aynı zamanda romanların farklı bakış açılarına göre nasıl incelenebileceğini de ortaya koyar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Okuma, metinde anlam, okur-tepkisi kuramı, *Jane Austen Kitap Kulübü*, Karen Jay Fowler, Jane Austen.

*“All the while it is Austen writing the really dangerous books, ‘Allegra continued.’ books that people really do believe, even hundreds of years later. How virtue will be recognized and rewarded. How love will prevail. How life is a romance.”*¹

1. Introduction

Taking its cue from the the premise that “Each of us has a private Austen”, Karen Jay Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book Club* tells the story of six Californians who embark on personal journeys of self-discovery during their discussions of Jane Austen novels in a book club. Although this club is originally Jocelyn’s idea for distracting her best-friend Sylvia who is on the brink of a painful divorce, it leads to remarkable developments in the lives of everybody involved. The novel makes the point that the act of reading encourages readers to discover different/hitherto unknown aspects of themselves and to grow as individuals. On the other hand, it also explores ways in which sharing the reading experience with others and exchanging opinions on the universal themes examined in Austen’s works prove to be a liberating and enriching experience for the members of the book club. As readers observing readers, we too are led into the private lives and journeys of each character and see that “Real people are really complicated.”² Building on the insights offered by Reader-Response theory that foregrounds the role of the reader in the creation of meaning, this article will examine ways in which the act of reading is portrayed as a profoundly transformative, therapeutic and mind-enlarging activity in *The Jane Austen Book Club*. In what follows, I will first offer a brief discussion of Reader-Response theory and then examine the novel in the light of these ideas. In doing that, my aim is to show how each reader in the novel creates his or her meaning through a transaction with the text based on personal associations. My reading of the novel will thus focus on what each book club reader brings to the novels along with the various perspectives through which the novels can be examined.

¹ Karen Jay Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*, New York: Penguin, 2004, p. 141.

² Ibid., p. 173.

2. Reader-Response Theory

Reader response theory draws attention to the significance of the reader's role in interpreting texts. Opposing the idea that there is a single and unchanging meaning inherent in every literary work, this theory maintains that the reader *creates* his or her own meaning through a "transaction" with the text based on his or her knowledge and experience that relates to the reading. In this sense, "reader-response theory differs most radically from previous theories about teaching literature in the degree of emphasis placed on the reader's response to an interpretation of the text. In reader-response theory, the text's meaning is considered to reside in the 'transaction' between the reader and the text, not from the text alone."³ So, the text itself is not an isolated entity that exists independent of the reader. As Roman Ingarden suggests, it is the convergence of the text and the reader that brings the literary work into existence.⁴ Given the centrality of the reader in this context, one could go as far as to suggest that there is no text without the reader. It is only by means of the reader's engagement that the text becomes alive.

The main argument of Reader-Response theory is that the reader is an active agent who creates the meaning of any given text through his/her interpretation of it. As Lousie Rosenblatt, a central figure in Reader-Response, argues in *Literature as Exploration*:

*"The special meaning, and more particularly submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the word communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text."*⁵

When we read a text, it acts a stimulus to which we respond personally and thus subjectively. That is to say, each reader responds differently to a text since he/she calls upon different associations and memories in the attempt to understand it. These various responses shape the ways in which we make sense of the text as we read through it. They also account for the

³ O'Neill qtd. in Samuel Totten, "Using reader-response theory to study poetry about the holocaust with high school students," *Social Studies*, Vol. 89, Jan/Feb 98, p. 31.

⁴ Gregory Castle, *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 177.

⁵ Lousie Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, (5th Edition), New York: Modern Language Association, 1995, p. 30-31.

multiplicity of interpretations people come up with as well as the different interpretations the same individual produces when reading the same text at a different point in time. In this context, reading a given text triggers a web of associations in the reader's mind. It is through this fluid web of associations that meaning is created.

According to leading proponents of reader-response such as Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, "reading is fundamentally a process in which the reader activates or completes a text."⁶ From this perspective, the reader is an active and creative participant rather than a passive consumer in the reading situation. It is significant to note that the reading situation does not exist in a vacuum; it is rather circumscribed by the social, historical and the situational context. In other words, both the text and the reader are situated and their situatedness has significant bearing on the reading experience. For Iser, the reader is also a concrete historical subject who discovers as much about herself as about the text she reads in the process of reading⁷. So reading becomes an awareness-raising experience that helps people grow as individuals since by reading they gain more self-knowledge. The minds engaged in the reading experience open up and expand, taking the subject to higher levels of consciousness and self-knowledge.

Like Iser, Stanley Fish believes that the reader is instrumental in the construction of meaningful texts and that the meaning derived from literary texts is the product of a "joint responsibility". Meaning is thus "redefined as an event rather than an entity" and "[T]he reader's response is not *to* the meaning; it *is* the meaning"⁸ In this sense, the reader is far from being a passive recipient of what the text says. Unlike text-based approaches such as Formalism and New Criticism, then, Reader-Response Theory "is interested in the formal aspects of literary texts only insofar as they illustrate the way readers frame interpretations. Indeed, the ambit of Reader-Response theory is antiformalist and process oriented."⁹

In brief, Reader-Response Theory "replaces examinations of a text in-and-of-itself with discussions of the reading process, the 'interaction' of reader and text."¹⁰ It examines "the role actual readers play in the determination of literary meaning, the relation of reading conventions to

⁶ Gregory Castle, *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 177.

⁷ Ibid., p. 177.

⁸ Ibid., *italics original*, p. 178.

⁹ Ibid., p. 175.

¹⁰ Mailloux qtd. in Yan Ma, "Reader-Response Theory: An Analysis of a Work of Chinese Postmodern Art," *Journal of Visual Literacy*, Vol. 15, Num. 1, p. 57.

textual interpretation, and the status of the reader itself"¹¹. As noted by Sheridan, proponents of Reader Response Theory "also perceive reading as a social act, contending that the reading experience is often more powerful and revelatory when it involves discussion and debate with others. In that way, a community of readers comes together in which members' ideas, questions, likes and dislikes, and concerns converge in a way that helps to illuminate that work under study."¹² Drawing on these ideas it is possible to suggest that different readings of Austen novels offered by each member in the book club illustrates that the act of reading is like a dialogue between the reader and the text that has meaning only when the two are interacting. In other words, the text is not an independent entity but rather comes into existence in the mind of the reader who is in dialogue with it.

3. Reading and Readers in *The Jane Austen Book Club*

The Jane Austen Book Club is a novel that was itself inspired by reading. As Kantrowitz points out, Fowler herself "fell for" Jane Austen when she was an adolescent and has reread her novels several times, always finding new meaning in them.

*"I'm astonished that whatever my current obsession in my private life, suddenly Jane Austen seems to be about that" Fowler said. She was moreover inspired to write the Jane Austen Book Club when "She spotted a sign for a Jane Austen book club in a bookstore and briefly thought it was an ad for a new novel with that title, one that would be "exactly for me." When she realized her mistake, she decided to write the book she wanted so much to read.*¹³

Published in 2004, *The Jane Austen Book Club* became an immediate bestseller and was adapted into a movie in 2007. The considerable success of the book can be attributed to the fact that

"the novel cleverly knit together the public's recent (and continuing) craze for Jane Austen with the public's recent (and continuing) craze for book groups. The book was affectionate, intelligent, soothing and down-to-earth, both escapist and inclusive, intent on proving that even the most

¹¹ Tompkins qtd. in Yan Ma, "Reader-Response Theory: An Analysis of a Work of Chinese Postmodern Art," *Journal of Visual Literacy*, Vol. 15, Num. 1, p. 60.

¹² qtd. in Samuel Totten, "Using reader-response theory to study poetry about the holocaust with high school students," *Social Studies*, Vol.89, Jan/Feb 98, p. 30-31.

¹³ qtd. in Barbara Kantrowitz, "For the 'Inner Austen' in Each of Us", *Newsweek*, 00289604, Vol. 143, Issue 24, 6.14.2004, p. 59.

lackadaisical reader could find something in Austen to enhance a present-day American life."¹⁴

As noted by this critic, Fowler successfully translated Austen for contemporary readers who could find something of themselves in the stories of both Jane Austen and Austen fans in *The Jane Austen Book Club*. Travelling across time and space by turning the leaves of the book, readers had the chance to imaginatively engage with Austen's world filtered through the minds of contemporary Americans. Catching with the spirit of the times, Fowler offered her readers a novel that can be categorized as "formulaic chick lit"; a genre that has enjoyed considerable commercial success since the 1990s. In *The Jane Austen Book Club*, the relative 'lightness' of the genre is complemented by the literary charm and charismatic presence of a canonical writer whose novels inspired readers both in and outside the book to look deeper at the world and within themselves.

Arguably, the real subject of the book club is the members of the club rather than the books they discuss. They are all nice people with nice houses and nice lives: the kind of people about whom Austen herself wrote, and whom we ourselves may wish to be¹⁵. The six members of the book club meet regularly every month for six months to discuss Jane Austen novels in each others' homes. As Amanda Craig suggests, "In a particularly smart and witty move, Karen Joy Fowler has each one choose the novel best suited to their temperament"¹⁶. During these monthly meetings, members of the book club not only discuss Austen novels but also share stories describing their lives, past and present. The founder of the book Club is Jocelyn - a single lady in her fifties who has never been married and whose greatest passion is breeding dogs. On the very first page, we are informed that "Jocelyn's Austen wrote wonderful novels about love and courtship but never married."¹⁷ The book club's first meeting takes place at her house where they discuss *Emma*. This is an apt choice for a woman like Jocelyn who has "everyone's best interests at heart, a strong matchmaking impulse, and an instinct for tidiness."¹⁸ Right after Jocelyn suggests that the *Emma* plot, the humbling of a pretty, self-satisfied girl, is the most popular plot of all time, we are taken back in time to witness episodes in Jocelyn's own life that lead

¹⁴ Liesl Schillinger, "Jane Austen Meets Nancy Drew", *New York Times Book Review*, 05.18.2008, p. 16.

¹⁵ Amanda Craig, "Further Education," *Newstatesman*, 55 Issue 1, 8.11. 2004, p. 55.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁷ Karen Jay Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*, New York: Penguin, 2004, p. 1

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

to the humbling of the pretty and self-satisfied Jocelyn. In this sense, the text serves as an instrument that spurs memories and thoughts in the mind of the reader, thereby allowing him/her to relate the text to personal experiences and fill in the spaces left by the text. The literary text is filled with gaps and blockages, “unexpected twists and turns, and frustration of expectations.”¹⁹ Consequently, it is constitutively indeterminate and invites a variety of different interpretations. As the particular responses of book club members show, each individual reads the text for himself or herself, drawing on past experiences and molding new experiences from the experience of reading.

As an avid reader of Austen’s work, Jocelyn believes that it is “essential to introduce Austen into your life regularly... let her look around”²⁰. Perceived in this light, Jane Austen is not simply a dead author but rather a lively and vibrant presence who continues to inspire readers with diverse backgrounds and personalities. Jocelyn’s love for Austen is shared by her childhood friend Sylvia who is rediscovering Austen in this time of need as she is going through a very difficult divorce from her husband of 32 years. “How could I have let myself forget that most marriages end in divorce?” she asks in conversation with Jocelyn. “You don’t learn that in Austen. She always has a wedding or two at the end.”²¹ She seems to be disillusioned with the fact that real life does not match representations of life she reads about in her favourite books. Sylvia, herself a domestic person who values a cozy home filled with family and friends above everything else sees a kindred soul in Austen: “Sylvia’s Austen was a daughter, a sister, an aunt. Sylvia’s Austen wrote her books in a busy sitting room, read them aloud to her family, yet remained an acute and nonpartisan observer of people. Sylvia’s Austen could love and be loved, but it didn’t cloud her vision, blunt her judgement.”²² In brief, Sylvia’s Austen is ‘one of us’; someone we can easily relate to and identify with. She is, at the same time, a role model who is remarkably perceptive and wise.

Sylvia’s daughter Allegra is a stunning, sharp and passionate 30 year old lesbian who has moved in with her mother to give her emotional support although she herself is suffering from heartbreak due to her recent eventful break-up from her writer girlfriend. She is emotionally sensitive and concerned about social issues. “Allegra’s Austen” we are told, “wrote about the impact of financial need on the intimate lives of women. If she’d worked

¹⁹ Gregory Castle, *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 279.

²⁰ Karen Jay Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*, New York: Penguin, 2004, p. 1

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

in a bookstore, Allegra would have shelved Austen in the horror section.”²³ During their discussion on *Emma*, she says that the thing that makes her unhappiest about the book are the class issues.

She is critical of Emma - the new and improved Emma - who understands that Harriet whose natural father was in trade wasn't good enough to marry the odious Elton and is lucky to get a farmer as a husband. When Bernadette responds by saying that the class issue in the book is more complicated she interrupts her, pointing out that “Austen says it's a stain if unbleached by nobility or wealth.”²⁴ “I think Austen is being ironic there” Prudie suggests in turn. “She has an ironic wit, I think some readers miss that. I m often ironic myself, especially in e-mail. Sometimes my friends ask, Was that a joke?”²⁵ These different readings of authorial intent show how meaning is not given but is rather in the eye of the beholder. Whereas Prudie who is herself often ironic can see the irony reading between and behind the lines, Allegra – with her own concerns and preoccupations – is constantly on the look out for politically incorrect statements as well as examples of social and gender discrimination.

The second book to be discussed in the book club is Allegra's choice: *Sense and Sensibility*. Since Allegra “was a creature of extremes – either stuffed or starving, freezing or boiling, exhausted or electric with energy,”²⁶ it comes as no surprise that

*“she instantly recognized herself in the sour Mr. Palmer. She, too, often thought of sharp things to say, and she said them more often than she wished. Mr. Palmer didn't suffer fools and neither did Allegra, but it wasn't something she was proud of. It didn't spring, as Austen suggested, from the desire to appear superior, unless lack of patience was a superior quality.”*²⁷

Just as the ironic Prudie can relate with ease to Austen's ironic wit, the passionate and outspoken Allegra can identify with a fictional character who embodies the character traits she finds in herself.

Unlike Allegra who ends up in the club by virtue of being Sylvia's daughter, Prudie – the youngest member of the club at 28 – is a true Austen devotee. Happily married to an attractive man who loves her, she teaches French and joins the club after having met Jocelyn at a Sunday matinee of

²³ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 51.

Mansfield Park. The narrator informs us that Prudie's was the Austen "whose books changed every time you read them, so that one year they were all romances and the next you suddenly noticed Austen's cool, ironic prose."²⁸ According to Reader-Response Theory, even the same reader reading the same text on different occasions is likely to produce different meanings because a multitude of variables contribute to our experience of any given text. Knowledge acquired between first and second readings of a text, personal experiences, changes in mood between encounters as well as change of purpose might lead to a different appraisals of the same text. So Prudie is right in suggesting that "You might change and your reading might change as a result."²⁹

The 67 year old Bernadette - funny, witty and eccentric - is the oldest member of the group and her "Austen is a comic genius."³⁰ She initially opposes the idea that the club should have a male member believing that "The dynamic changes with men. They pontificate rather than communicate. They talk more than they share."³¹ She goes on to add that "Besides, men don't do book clubs," Bernadette said. "They see reading as a solitary pleasure. When they read at all." However, she soon overcomes her prejudices and changes her mind concerning the girls-only rule. She welcomes Grigg to the club: "It's so lovely to see a man taking an interest in Miss Austen," she tells him. "Delightful to get the male perspective. We're so pleased that you're here."³²

Grigg the science-fiction fan in his forties, becomes a valuable member of the club showing each time they meet his aptitude for reading as well as sharing his Austen. Although at the beginning nobody including Grigg himself knows who Grigg's Austen was, he turns out to be a perceptive reader whose interpretations of Austen's work stir up interesting discussions amongst the members. When Grigg proposes that he wants to host the meeting for *Northanger Abbey*, the other members of the group hope Grigg wasn't saying this just because it was provocative. When Jocelyn asks Grigg why he likes *Northanger Abbey* best of all Austen's book, he says: "I just love how it's all about reading novels. Who's heroine, what's an adventure? Austen poses these questions very directly. There's something very pomo going on there."³³ The other members of the group aren't intimate enough

²⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 82.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 1.

³¹ Ibid., p. 3.

³² Ibid., p. 10.

³³ Ibid., p. 138.

with postmodernism to give it a nickname and are further surprised to find out that Grigg went out of his way to also read the *Mysteries of Udolpho* which Austen's novel refers to in order to have a better understanding of *Northanger Abbey*. When it is decided in this meeting that the next book to be discussed will be *Pride and Prejudice*, Grigg asks them not to reveal anything since he hasn't read the book yet. This, too, sends shock waves among other members of the group: "Grigg had read *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and God knows how much science fiction - there were books all over the cottage- but he'd never found the time or the inclination to read *Pride and Prejudice*. We really didn't know what to say."³⁴

The act of reading as well as the reading choices individuals make play a very important role in the novel and often determine characters' perceptions of one another. The members of the book club are brought together thanks to their common interest in Austen's novels. In this sense, Austen's work is instrumental in helping them find and discover various aspects of one another and forge closer ties of friendship. Moreover, the members of the club seem to subscribe to the belief that 'we are what we read' and think that one's choice of books reveals a lot about one's personality and character. A very good illustration of this point can be observed in Jocelyn's reasoning as she is pondering whether to date Grigg or not: "I think I'll read those books he gave me," Jocelyn said. "If they turn out to be good books, well then, maybe. Maybe I'll give him a chance." And when she finally reads the two Le Guins that Grigg gives her, she tells Grigg she finds the writer amazing. Heartened by Jocelyn's positive feedback, Grigg suggests that she reads other writers who he thinks she might like. As they continue to talk about books

*"Their voices dropped; the conversation became intimate, but the bits we could hear were still about books. So Jocelyn was a science fiction reader now. We had no objection. We could see how it might be unsafe for people prone to dystopian fantasies, but as long as science fiction wasn't all you read, as long as there was a large allowance of realism, what was the harm? It was nice to see Grigg looking so happy. Perhaps we would all start reading Le Guin."*³⁵

Ultimately, it is their shared love of books and reading that bring Jocelyn and Grigg together and they start dating as the novel comes to a close.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 138.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 236.

Daniel, the husband who left Sylvia for another woman, also has his happy ending when he shows up with a copy of *Persuasion* during the final meeting of the club asking forgiveness and saying *Persuasion* is favourite book. Seeing father and daughter together in the living room leads Sylvia to remember the good old days when they were a family and makes her realize that, despite what has happened, she still has a soft spot for her husband. As the discussion on *Persuasion* continues, an incredulous Prudie asks Bernadette who has a remarkable capacity to find something to like in everyone and everything whether she still believes in happy endings after having done so many things and having read so many books. “Oh my Lord, yes” Bernadette answers. “I guess I would. I’ve had so many of them.”³⁶ Fowler, like Austen, makes sure that her characters get their happy endings after all as characters are reunited with old partners or find new ones. Sylvia and Daniel reconcile, Jocelyn and Grigg start dating, Bernadette meets her future husband and Allegra is reunited with her ex-girlfriend. Towards the end of the book the narrator says: “We’d let Austen into our lives, and now we were all either married or dating.”³⁷ Life imitates art as avid readers of Austen allow the positive vibes they project on to their reading gain full momentum in their own lives.

At the very end of her acknowledgements with which the book concludes, Fowler repeats her premise that everyone has a private Austen and reveals that hers “is the Austen who showed her work to her friends and family and took such obvious pleasure in their responses. Thanks most of all to her, then, for those renewable, rereadable, endlessly fascinating books and everything that’s been written about them.”³⁸ Here, Fowler seems to echo the narrator who assumed that “In three or four years it would be time to read Austen again.”³⁹

4. Conclusion

In the words of Louise Rosenblatt, “All readers have individualized reading experiences because each reader has unique background schemas.”⁴⁰ Since all readers bring their own emotions, concerns, life experiences, and their various knowledge bases in different subjects to their reading, each interpretation is subjective and unique. Reading breaks down the barrier between subject and object in part by transforming the text as-object into

³⁶ Ibid., p. 243.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 249.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 288.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 249.

⁴⁰ Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, (5th Edition), New York: Modern Language Association, 1995, p. 55.

another subject, one that occupies the reader's consciousness, existing simultaneously within it.⁴¹ In this context,

*"As members of the book club debate Marianne's marriage to Brandon and whether or not Charlotte Lucas is gay, they reveal nothing so much as their own "private Austen(s)": to Jocelyn, an unmarried "control freak," the author is the consummate matchmaker; to solitary Prudie, she's the supreme ironist; to the lesbian Allegra, she's the disingenuous defender of the social caste system, etc. The book club's conversation is variously astute, petty, obvious and funny, but no one stays with it: the characters nibble high-calorie desserts, sip margaritas and drift off into personal reveries."*⁴²

According to Patricia T. O'Conner *The Jane Austen Book Club* is "that rare book that reminds us what reading is all about. In her portrait of a California reading group, Karen Joy Fowler turns a mirror on the gawking, voyeuristic presence that lurks in every story: the reader. What results is Fowler's shrewdest, funniest fiction yet, a novel about how we engage with a novel."⁴³ Reading about readers, we also embark on an interpretive process that creates the literary text. An additional factor that influences our reading experience is Fowler's decision to take Austen - a writer who wrote universally acclaimed classics - as her model: "At once subtle and playful, Fowler mimics Austen's pacing and voice. The prose is never precious or fussy; the dialogue is sharp and conversational."⁴⁴ The characters reveal their own stories in the process of reading and discussing Austen's novels and find interesting parallels in the plots of their own lives. As I have argued throughout, the real subject of this book is the figure of the reader who brings her own expectations, biases and assumptions to her reading. Various dynamics including the historical, sociopolitical, cultural and situational, operate in every reading situation, hence there is no such thing as context free discourse. Personal experiences as well as specific backgrounds shape the reading experience and the critical interpretation of a text. That is to say, meaning is not found but made by the reader. In this sense, *The Jane Austen Book Club* aptly illustrates how readings are constructed at a personal level and through its foregrounding of the interactive process by means of which

⁴¹ Gregory Castle, *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 175.

⁴² *Publisher's Weekly*, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-59316-027-2>. (01.03.2013)

⁴³ Patricia T. O'Conner, "Mr. Darcy Is a Boorish Snob. Please Discuss", *New York Times Book Review*, Vol. 153 Issue 52837, 5.2.2004, p. 11.

⁴⁴ Anita Sama, "'Dinner' is way overdone," *USA Today*. (01.26.2006)

the reader participates in the creation of a text's potential meanings, shows what it means to read and respond to literature.

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