

The Jane Austen Book Club

by Karen Joy Fowler

About the Book

In California's central valley, five women and one man join to discuss Jane Austen's novels. Over the six months they get together, marriages are tested, affairs begin, unsuitable arrangements become suitable, and love happens. With her eye for the frailties of human behavior and her ear for the absurdities of social intercourse, Karen Joy Fowler has never been wittier nor her characters more appealing. The result is a delicious dissection of modern relationships.

Dedicated Austenites will delight in unearthing the echoes of Austen that run through the novel, but most readers will simply enjoy the vision and voice that, despite two centuries of separation, unite two great writers of brilliant social comedy.

Praise for the Book

"Karen Joy Fowler creates a novel that is so winning, so touching, so delicately, slyly witty that admirers of *Persuasion* and *Emma* will simply sigh with happiness."

— **Michael Dirda**,
The Washington Post Book World

"Fowler's shrewdest, funniest fiction yet. . . . You don't have to be a student of Jane Austen to enjoy it, either. . . . Lovers of Austen will relish this book, but I envy any reader who comes to it unfamiliar with her. There's no better introduction."

— **Patricia O'Connor**,
The New York Times Book Review

"*The Jane Austen Book Club* offers a sparkling rumination on the act of reading itself and how beloved books can serve as refuge, self-definition, snobbish barricades against other people or pathways out of the old self to a wider world. [It is] a terrific comic novel about a closed society merrily transforming itself by reading."

— **Maureen Corrigan**,
NPR's All Things Considered

Courtesy of Penguin Group

About the Author

Karen Joy Fowler

American writer (1950–)

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Personal Information: Born February 7, 1950, in Bloomington, IN; daughter of Cletus (an animal psychologist) and Joy Arthur (a schoolteacher; maiden name, Fossum) Burke; married Hugh Fowler, 1972; children: Ryan, Shannon.

Education: Attended University of California, Berkeley, 1968–70, B.A., 1972; attended State University of New York, 1970–71; University of California, Davis, M.A., 1974.

Addresses: Agent: Wendy Weil, Wendy Weil Agency, 747 Third Ave., New York, NY 10017.

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Career: Novelist, short story writer, and educator. Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH, writer-in-residence.

Awards: John W. Campbell Memorial Award (Hugo Award) for best new writer, World Science Fiction Society, 1987; grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, 1988; Commonwealth Club Medal, 1991, for *Sarah Canary*; World Fantasy Award for best collection, World Fantasy Convention, 1999, for *Black Glass: Short Fictions*; finalist for PEN/Faulkner Award, 2002, for *Sister Noon*; Nebula Award for best short story, 2004, for “What I Didn’t See.”

WRITINGS

- *Artificial Things* (story collection), Bantam (New York, NY), 1986.
- *Peripheral Vision* (story collection), Pulphouse (Eugene, OR), 1990.
- *Sarah Canary* (novel), Holt (New York, NY), 1991.
- (Contributor) Kim Stanley Robinson, editor, “*Pulphouse*” *Science-Fiction Short Stories*, Pulphouse (Eugene, OR), 1991.
- *The Sweetheart Season: A Novel*, Holt (New York, NY), 1996.
- *Black Glass: Short Fictions*, Holt (New York, NY), 1998.
- *Sister Noon*, Putnam (New York, NY), 2001.
- *The Jane Austen Book Club*, Putman (New York, NY), 2004.

Work represented in periodicals, including *Pulphouse* and *Science Fiction*.

Media Adaptations: *The Jane Austen Book Club* has been optioned for film by Sony Pictures Entertainment and was adapted for audio by Listen & Live, 2004.

Sidelights

Winner of the 1987 Hugo Award for best new writer, Karen Joy Fowler is the author of short story collections and novels that use fantastical characters and situations to bring to light various aspects of human nature. Her work has been well received by critics.

In her first story collection, *Artificial Things*, Fowler compiled thirteen short stories, many of which had appeared previously in periodicals. Applauding the stories as worthy “examples of both literary form and style,” *Voice of Youth Advocates*’s Allison Rogers Hutchison especially recommended the work to writing students. The critic also praised Fowler’s skillful use of fantastic plotlines and characters to show the human world in a different light. Fowler accomplishes this by presenting humans through the eyes of her alien characters. For instance, in one story, insectile aliens probe the mind of a poet, while in another, humans in the far future study replicants who reenact historical events. Karen S. Ellis noted in *Kliatt* that although many of the stories in *Artificial Things* were abstract, the “study of human nature” was an important theme in Fowler’s work.

In 1990 Fowler issued her second collection of short stories. Titled *Peripheral Vision*, the volume garnered further praise for Fowler as an emerging writer. Reviewing the work in the *Washington Post Book World*, Gregory Feeley lauded Fowler as a “writer of clarity and humor.” In particular, the reviewer cited “The Faithful Companion at Forty” and “Contention” as examples of the author’s interest in writing modern stories which, he felt, retained the element of fantasy “without shifting their centers of gravity.”

This sense of fantasy also pervades Fowler’s novel *Sarah Canary*. Set in the late nineteenth-century, it recounts the adventures of a mysterious woman called Sarah Canary and a Chinese immigrant laborer named Chin. The book begins when Sarah — who has been described variously by critics as a mysterious wild creature and an enigmatic woman who speaks in grunts and strange sounds — is entrusted to Chin’s care after she wanders into his labor camp. Chin is asked to take Sarah to an asylum, but before he can accomplish this task, he is jailed. Separated from Sarah, the imprisoned Chin vows to free her, marking the beginning of their adventures together. Accompanying them on their journey are B.J., an escapee from a mental institution, and Adelaide Dixon, a free-thinking lecturer. The narrative follows the characters through a bizarre series of events until they reach San Francisco, where Chin escapes to China and eventually becomes a government bureaucrat. Sarah, on the other hand, vanishes without a trace or explanation.

The plot of *Sarah Canary* is loosely structured and has lent itself to numerous interpretations. Barbara Quick, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, said that the story presents a “dreamscape” through which Fowler reveals a “tableau of the Pacific Northwest in the 1870s.” *Los Angeles Times Book Review* contributor Richard Eder described *Sarah Canary* as “part ghost story, part picaresque adventure,” an unusual narrative style that has allowed Fowler to present an ironic and painful vision of late nineteenth-century America. Explaining that the main characters of the book are representative of the victims of that age, Eder drew parallels between events in history and the action of the story. For example, he believed the character of Chin evokes the large number of Chinese immigrants who worked on building American railroads, while the female characters reveal the plight of women at the time. Another reviewer, Michael Dorris, wrote in the *Chicago Tribune Books* that *Sarah Canary* is a “full-tilt allegory, an uncompromising work of imagination that asks its readers to not merely suspend disbelief but to surrender it.” Describing the landscape of the book as mythic, Dorris called Sarah

“a cipher, an embodiment of each individual’s deeply buried need for mystery in life.” Quick noted in her final assessment that *Sarah Canary* “is an extraordinarily strong first novel” that “whets the appetite for what . . . [Fowler] will serve up next.”

Fowler next served up an optimistic novel about a mill town that makes breakfast cereal. *The Sweetheart Season: A Novel* takes place in 1947, and the mill owner decides to form an all-girl traveling baseball team. He hopes this will promote his business and lift the girls’ spirits, as they are bemoaning the fact that the war is over, but none of the boys wants to come back to his hometown. By going on the road, he reasons, they have a better chance of meeting nice, young bachelors. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor called the story “a sluggish though skillful second novel, . . . alternately a romp and a slog.” Deirdre McNamer, however, wrote in the *New York Times Book Review*: “Ms. Fowler’s willingness to take detours, her unapologetic delight in the odd historical fact, her shadowy humor and the elegant unruliness of her language, all elevate her story from the picaresque to the grand.”

In *Black Glass: Short Fictions*, the author presents fifteen varied short stories, ranging in scope from a Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agent who encounters the spirit of Carry A. Nation to aliens taking lessons on love Earth style. Christine DeZelar-Tiedman, writing in the *Library Journal*, called the collection “stunning” and noted that despite the extraordinary conceits of the stories the author makes “what should seem incredible . . . fully believable.” A *Publishers Weekly* contributor commented that the author “delights in the arcane,” adding that the stories “are occasionally puzzling but never dull.” Elizabeth Hand, writing in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, noted: “This is a superior collection, gracefully written but also utterly absorbing. I only wish it had been twice as long.”

Set in 1890s San Francisco, Fowler’s 2001 novel *Sister Noon* tells the story of Lizzie Hayes, a single woman in her forties who volunteers to work at the Ladies’ Relief and Protection Society Home. Known for her reliability, Hayes nevertheless involves herself in adventure and intrigue when the notorious Mrs. Mary Ellen Pleasant arrives at the home with a young orphan girl named Jenny Ijub in tow. The parents of Jenny are unknown but rumors abound, including one that Jenny’s father is wealthy, leading Lizzie to think of a possible donation to the home. Meanwhile, Mrs. Pleasant may be much more than she seems, perhaps even a voodoo priestess. “The story is a blend of history, suspense, and commentary on societal norms and social pretensions that both guide and confine,” wrote Eileen Hardy in *Booklist*. Starr E. Smith, writing in the *Library Journal*, called the effort “a deft blend of historical fact, urban myth, social satire, and romance.” A *Publishers Weekly* contributor wrote that the author “moves her principals through time and space seamlessly and gracefully, and exquisitely renders San Francisco.”

Perhaps Fowler’s most successful novel in terms of widespread recognition is *The Jane Austen Book Club*. Optioned for film shortly after its spring 2004 release, the story offers an exploration of Austen’s novels as it follows the activities of six book club members. The members are diverse in age and life experience: only one is a man, and he becomes an object of constant speculation by the others. However, the characters all have one

common thread besides their love of reading — each exhibits strong character traits shared by some of Austen’s characters or the author herself. “Fowler shares Austen’s fascination with the power of stories, and explores the same timeless aspects of human behavior that Austen so masterfully dramatizes,” wrote Donna Seaman in *Booklist*. Calling the novel “ingenious,” John Freeman, writing in *People*, added that “the real pleasure comes from watching Fowler pay homage to Austen’s gift.” A *Publishers Weekly* contributor commented that “the novelty of Fowler’s package should attract significant numbers of book club members, not to mention the legions of Janeites craving good company and happy endings.”

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BOOKS

- *Twentieth-Century Science-Fiction Writers*, 3rd edition, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1991.

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, May 15, 2001, Eileen Hardy, review of *Sister Noon*, p. 1731; March 15, 2004, Donna Seaman, review of *The Jane Austen Book Club*, p. 1265.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, August 1, 1996, review of *The Sweetheart Season: A Novel*, p. 1074.
- *Kliatt*, April, 1987, Karen S. Ellis, review of *Artificial Things*, pp. 29-30.
- *Library Journal*, February 1, 1998, Christine DeZelar-Tiedman, review of *Black Glass: Short Fictions*, p. 114; May 1, 2001, Starr E. Smith, review of *Sister Noon*, p. 126.
- *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, October 20, 1991, Richard Eder, review of *Sarah Canary*, pp. 3, 7; September 29, 1996, review of *The Sweetheart Season: A Novel*, p. 2.
- *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, May, 1992, Orson Scott Card, review of *Sarah Canary*, p. 50; August, 1998, Elizabeth Hand, review of *Black Glass*, p. 30.
- *New York Times Book Review*, November 10, 1991, Barbara Quick, review of *Sarah Canary*, p. 18; October 13, 1996, Deirdre McNamer, review of *The Sweetheart Season*, p. 27.
- *People*, May 24, 2004, John Freeman, review of *The Jane Austen Book Club*, p. 47.
- *Publishers Weekly*, January 5, 1998, review of *Black Glass*, p. 59; April 9, 2001, review of *Sister Noon*, p. 48; March 22, 2004, review of *The Jane Austen Book Club*, p. 59; August 23, 2004, John F. Bank, “The Jane Austen Book Club by Karen Joy Fowler, a Bestseller for Marian Wood’s Imprint at Putnam, Has Been Optioned as a Movie by Sony Pictures Entertainment, with John Calley as Producer,” p. 12.
- *Tribune Books* (Chicago, IL), December 15, 1991, Michael Dorris, review of *Sarah Canary*, section 14, pp. 1, 9.
- *Voice of Youth Advocates*, June, 1987, Allison Rogers Hutchison, review of *Artificial Things*, pp. 89-90.

- *Washington Post Book World*, April 29, 1990, Gregory Feeley, review of *Peripheral Vision*, p. 8.

ONLINE

- *Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, Inc., Web site*, <http://www.sfwaweb.org/> (November 17, 2005), KJF Web page includes biography of and news on Karen Joy Fowler.

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2006

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online

Author Interview

Q: In interviews, what is the question you are most frequently asked?

Karen Joy Fowler: Whose point of view is the novel written from.

Q: What's the answer?

KJF: You need to think of the book club as a kind of seventh character. It's a very flexible voice because sometimes all the other characters are in the collective, but at other times someone is disapproved of and therefore not in it.

Q: Which of the characters in your novel are you most like?

KJF: Sylvia, because she is the one character whose children are present — and children are omnipresent in my life. I also share her sense of impending doom!

Q: Sony have bought the film rights to your book. Who would you cast, and why?

KJF: I have such a strong image of the characters that I can't begin to imagine who would play them. No one actor matches. If business considerations could be put aside most writers would prefer unknowns.

Q: What are you reading at the moment?

KJF: One of the wonderful things about being a writer is that it's part of my job to read. Most recently I read a book called *Mother Nature* by Sarah Hardy. The author is a biologist who looks at evolutionary theory, focussing on maternal strategies to keep offspring alive. The chapter on insects was very distressing! Recently I also read *Lord Byron's Novel* by John Crowley. I became so caught up in it that I then read *The Bride Of Science*, a biography of Ada Lovelace who was Byron's daughter. It's wonderful that I can follow my obsessions, whatever is interesting me. Now I must read *Don't Let's Go To The Dogs Tonight* because that is the next book club choice.

Q: So you're a member of a book club?

KJF: Yes.

Q: Do you discuss your own books?

KJF: Yes, my fellow book club members insist. It's lovely of them but not always comfortable because they're very smart and highly critical of other books — but when they get to me they always think it's really nice. I can't go to the bathroom because I'm worried they'll be telling each other what they really think.

Q: What did you read as a child?

KJF: Lots of the children's books I loved had fantastical elements. I remember a book called *Castles And Dragons*, which was a collection of fairy tales from different cultures. I also loved *Mistress Masham's Repose* and *The Once And Future King* by T.H. White. *The Once And Future King* is the most important model I have as a writer, because it persuaded me early on that there were no rules, that you can write whatever you like so long as you are enjoying yourself, that it's fine to digress. And *The Lord Of The Rings*, long before those books became what they are now, and which I loved. Also the Nesbit books, *The Wind In The Willows* and *Mary Poppins*.

Q: Which authors do you most admire?

KJF: There are so many. Being a writer has made me less critical — mostly when I read books I like them. Ursula Le Guin and Molly Gloss are absolutely fantastic. Kelly Link is a short story writer who writes unlike anyone else. My favourite book of the last few years was Kevin Brockmeier's *The Truth About Celia*. I loved *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell. Also *The Hamilton Case*, by Michelle de Kretser, about the independence movement in Ceylon. And *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston.

Q: Which of Austen's characters would you choose to be stranded on a desert island with?

KJF: There's good company, and then there's competence in the wild. Maybe Captain Wentworth to make a sail. But I don't think he's the person whose company I'd enjoy the most. For company I'd like to be with Elizabeth Bennett, just like everybody else.

Q: And which of your own?

KJF: I'll never write a group of characters that I'll love as much as in my first novel — because they were the first.

Q: Austen's books often leave you wondering whether all of her matches are good ideas. Do any of the matches in *The Jane Austen Book Club* create disquiet?

KJF: My New York editor was very distressed that Allegra went back with Corinne at the end. I do feel that they are not a match and it will all explode again very soon. And I don't think Bernadette's marriage will last. But I think the others will. I think Jocelyn and Grigg is a nice combination of a bossy woman and a man who likes bossy women.

Q: Austen lovers feel a particularly intense connection to books. Are there more book communities you know of that engage with a like passion? Why these and not others?

KJF: I don't know the answer but will say that when the book came out I was expecting many emails about mistakes to do with Austen. There were none. However there are about five lines in the book to do with Patrick O'Brian and there were lots of emails about him. In Kansas they thought I was lucky not to have chosen Dickens, as the Dickens people are much harder to please. And, of course, there's Sherlock Holmes. I read recently that the Sherlock Holmes people are in two camps — those who want to believe in Sherlock Holmes as a real person, and don't want to hear anything about Conan Doyle, and those who want to talk about Conan Doyle as well. They can't be in the same room together. This demonstrates a passionate attachment to books that I highly approve of.

Courtesy of Penguin Group

Discussion Questions

1. The author opens the novel with a quote from Jane Austen, part of which reads, “Seldom, very seldom does complete truth belong to any human disclosure.” Do you agree with this sentiment? Why do you think the author chooses to open the novel with this quote? How might this statement apply to each of the characters in the book?
2. When the group is first being formed, Bernadette suggests that it should consist exclusively of women: “The dynamic changes with men. They pontificate rather than communicate. They talk more than their share.” (page 3). What do you think of her statement? How does Grigg affect the group’s dynamic? How would things have been different without him?
3. While the group is reading *Sense and Sensibility* and discussing Mrs. Dashwood, Sylvia mentions that “the problems of older women don’t interest most writers” (page 46) and is thrilled that Austen seems to care. Do you agree with this, that most writers aren’t interested in older women? What about society in general? How does Fowler approach older women? Later, Prudie says that “An older man can still fall in love. An older woman better not.” (page 47) Do you agree? How does Fowler deal with this issue?
4. On page 228 Sylvia asks, “Why should unhappiness be so much more powerful than happiness?” How would you answer her? How does each character find her/his own happiness in the novel?
5. The book club meets from March through August. How does the group change over these six months? “I always like to know how a story ends,” Bernadette says on page 199. How do you think this story ends (the “epilogue to the epilogue”)? Does Bernadette have a happy marriage with Senor Obando? Do Allegra and Corinne stay together? How about Jocelyn and Grigg? Daniel and Sylvia?
6. At the end of the novel, Jocelyn reluctantly agrees to read some science fiction, including the work of Ursula Le Guin, and really likes it. What other authors do you think the group might like? Although they would have to change the name of their group, what author would you suggest for the Central Valley/River City all-Jane-Austen-all-the-time book club to read next? What do you suggest for your own group?

7. If you're new to Jane Austen, are you now interested in reading her work? Based on what you've learned from Karen Jay Fowler, which novel would you go to first? If you are already a "dedicated Janeite," how has reading *The Jane Austen Book Club* made you feel about your favorite author? How would you describe your own "private Austen"? What novel would you recommend to first-time readers of Austen?

Courtesy of Penguin Group