

WRITING A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL WITH HELP FROM JANE AUSTEN

True love among teens

BY AMY ROSENBERG

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Polly Shulman remembers reading "Pride and Prejudice" at age 13. "I stayed up literally until dawn was coming in the window," she says. We're sitting on a velveteen green couch in her airy living room, surrounded by flea-market treasures: an 18th century teaspoon, a pile of timeworn books, an unidentifiable oblong object with a miniature painting of an ancient ship. It's easy, in this setting, to picture a young Shulman lost in the pages of a romance. "My heart was pounding. I couldn't stop reading," she says.

Thirty years later, Shulman has paid homage to her favorite novel by writing one of her own. "Enthusiasm" (Putnam, \$15.99), her first book, aims to inspire teenagers with the kind of passion for reading that Jane Austen inspired in her. It features two high school sophomores: Julie, the narrator, who loves "Pride and Prejudice," and Ashleigh, Julie's best friend, who has a penchant for enthusiasm. If an idea catches Ashleigh's fancy, she'll immerse herself in it completely - dragging Julie along - until a new obsession takes its place. When Julie lends her "Pride and Prejudice," Ashleigh dons long skirts, speaks in 19th century cadences, and initiates a search for True Love.

There seems to be a little bit of Ashleigh in Shulman; she is, at the very least, a person of diverse interests. After earning a degree in mathematics from Yale University, Shulman, who grew up in Manhattan, found work as an editor at the Village Voice Literary Supplement. She spent 10 years in that job before becoming an editor at the science magazine Discover. Five years later, Shulman began freelance editing and writing for both science and literary publications.

All the while, she dreamed of writing novels for teenagers. "Readers that age have such a strong response," she says. "I really love that, and I wanted to be able to bring it to other people." She wrote many first chapters and stuck them in a drawer; it wasn't until one of a regular writing book reviews for Newsday ended in 2003 that she decided it was time to focus on a novel.

"I said to myself, 'OK, now I have to go get a job in an office or write a book,'" she explains. "So I got

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out all the first chapters and looked them over, and this was the one that struck me the most."

What's striking about it is, in part, what it isn't. Unlike many novels for young readers, "Enthusiasm" does not take up hard-core issues that modern teens confront: violence, drugs, sex. Instead, with a refreshing innocence, the book offers a fanciful romance replete with yearning, courting and first kisses. The plot hinges on Julie and Ashleigh sneaking into a cotillion ball at a posh boys' prep school, where they meet two charmers and develop a crush on the same one (named Charles Grandison Parr, after Samuel Richardson's fictional hero Sir Charles Grandison, who served as a model for many of Austen's own heroes). Julie hides her feelings about Parr and suffers through Ashleigh's infatuation with him until a school play forces everything into the open - with the happiest of results.

Even the language in the book is delightfully wholesome: You'll never hear the teenagers in it swearing, but their exclamations will charm you - "Have you lost your lemon drops?" Julie asks Ashleigh - as will the book's hidden sonnets, acrostics and clever rhymes.

"I was a little surprised to find that that was what I'd written," Shulman says. "I would have thought I'd have written something edgier." Her own teen years offered great potential for edginess: Her mother, feminist writer Alix Kates Shulman, believed in offering her children independence and freedom. (As Shulman wryly puts it: "We always had a lot of birth control available.") But when she rediscovered the first chapter of what became "Enthusiasm," Shulman

knew she wanted to write an Austenesque book, and that doing so would preclude anything too racy. ("I don't know - can you write a Jane Austen novel with a lot of oral sex in it?")

But this is not to imply that the book ignores serious issues. Part of its appeal lies in the fact that big conflicts form a backdrop to the lighthearted plot. For one thing, Julie's parents are divorced, and her mother, who runs a failing antique shop, barely manages to make ends meet. Ashleigh's family, on the other hand, is well off, as are most of Julie's other friends. Like the characters in Austen's novels, Julie is made all too aware of her precise position in the broad middle class.

Beyond that, Julie's father is married to an "igsome" woman ("ig" being a favorite word of Julie's and Ashleigh's, used to express disapproval, as in

"Ig-Ned-emphatic ig! I really don't like him") who desperately wants a baby but keeps having miscarriages. Julie must struggle to cultivate a peaceful relationship with her. She must also learn the ethics of friendship: Ashleigh is fierce in her loyalty, but Julie finds herself lying to her and deliberately creating distance.

Introducing such complexities into a teen romance takes a good deal of skill and bodes well for Shulman's next project: either a sci-fi fantasy or a historical novel. But in the unlikely event that things don't work out, Shulman has another option: "If it totally fails, then I'm going to become a junk dealer," she says. "Wait!" She jumps up from her couch. "I have to show you my recent eBay purchase." She picks up the strange oblong object. "It's an ostrich egg," she says proudly. "The guy who sold it to me bought it from an old guy in England whose great grandfather painted it when he sailed between England and Africa in the 1850s." Her enthusiasm is contagious.

Amy Rosenberg is a contributing editor at Poets and Writers.

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