

Jane Austen in California

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [May 29, 2013](#) issue



How might three postmodern suburban sisters separated from Jane Austen by 200 years, an ocean, the women's movement and the sexual revolution, live the narrative of *Pride and Prejudice*? "Our goal," write Hank Green and Bernie Su, creators of the *Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (lizziebennet.com), "is to tell and honor a great story in a way never experienced before." In setting out to adapt a novel into a web series styled as a video blog, it helps to begin with one of most loved—and most adapted—stories of all time.

The series, which posted its last webisode in March, is self-aware and humorous in trying to show how stories ring true across time and space. Because it was designed for viewer interaction across Internet platforms, viewers had their say about how the diaries navigate that territory. Viewers' affection for the diaries testifies to the success of the project in performing Austen for the contemporary world.

That performance obliges the creators to change the story to reflect the artifacts of our era. Austen's army officers are turned into championship swimmers; a marriage proposal becomes a job offer; unfortunate rules of inheritance are replaced by a bad mortgage. Elizabeth becomes Lizzie, a 24-year-old grad student still living at home.

Elizabeth's youngest sisters disappear from the story, for few contemporary families have five daughters—and the pressing need to get all those girls married (the entailment on the Bennet estate) makes no sense in today's California. So Mary becomes a cousin. And Kitty? Kitty is a cat.

Diehard Austen fans may be annoyed at such changes, but the fun of the diaries is in how they prompt us to think through the choices made in translating cultural artifacts. The three remaining sisters are enough to drive the narrative and do the character work of the story. As in Austen's novel, the charm of Lizzie (Ashley Clements) contrasts with the unreal goodness of Jane (Laura Spencer) and the dismissible silliness of Lydia (Mary Kate Wiles). More than the original, the diaries wrestle with this dynamic, giving us a Jane and a Lydia—and finally, a Lizzie—all winsomely portrayed as sympathetic, layered and human.

The show struggles a bit in translating some of the bigger aspects of Austen's plot, and this struggle reflects the distance between 1813 and 2013 in terms of sexual mores and the roles of women. How to replicate the horror of Lydia running off with Wickham? It's very difficult to answer this question in a world in which sexual autonomy is such a given that it's almost impossible to call any sexual encounter a poor choice, much less to imbue it with shame. The solution, in the diaries, is to turn that elopement into a sex video, sold by a manipulative Wickham. An online countdown marks the time until "Youtube star Lydia Bennet" will be fully exposed to the world. (As in the novel, Darcy will save the day, but it's an odd sort of saving when the whole Internet world already knows that the video exists. Exposure, not existence, is the problem).

The diaries are simply doing the best they can to translate Austen's story to a world of incoherent sexual ethics. Lizzie's worries about Lydia, long before the Wickham debacle, say a great deal about this problem. In response to a "viewer question" about whether she is judging Lydia, Lizzie affirms what is surely cultural orthodoxy: "I'm not opposed to responsible, smart, safe women doing whatever they like in the bedroom with whomever they like." The next part of Lizzie's response, though, hints at trouble with this orthodoxy: "I just hope that Lydia *becomes* one of those women. Soon."

The ability to give meaningful consent is not a given for today's Lydia, and her sisters don't have the vocabulary they need to express the real concern this issue raises, a concern validated when Wickham—greedy and vengeful—manipulates and

uses Lydia.

Despite the official confession that consenting adults can do what they will, the diaries are false in their treatment of sexuality. In a world absent both Austen's chaperones and the ethics of a community of faith, Lizzie and Jane are inexplicably restrained about sex. More than once—and each reference feels forced—the diaries assure us that no sex has happened. When Lizzie teases Jane about her love interest, Jane assures her that the couple stayed up late talking, and hopes that dating and “sexy times” might lead to something “more pure and wholesome.” When their mother contrives to have them stay with Jane's boyfriend, we are told that Jane sleeps in a separate room, because “it's not like we're engaged.”

Given the diaries' felicity with cultural translation, these moves are either an oddity or they suggest a longing for a sexual ethic that makes sense. Not the ethic of 1813, in which women's sexuality was surely as commodified as it is in an age of Internet porn, but an ethic that gives sex meaning in a larger story. In a world of real love stories, the longing for something pure and the existence of predators who might manipulate “consent” out of one's baby sister, one needs the Christian story in order for sex to become something other than hedonism or manipulation. What might the bright and articulate Lizzie Bennet do with bodies that are neither commodities nor throwaway sites for gratification but temples of the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), meant for real good in the world?

Like the creators of the diaries, Christian communities have to do the work of translation—translating the sexual ethics of scripture into ways that make faithful, loving, human sense. We, too, have a great story to tell, and in each time and place we have to tell it in a way that it's never been told before. Wooden repetition will fall flat, but simply tossing out Christian theology would be disastrous (as it is for Lydia). We need conversation about the why of sexuality, and we need the creative cultural work of living as the though bodies really are for the glory of God (1 Cor. 6:20).