

*Pride and Prejudice* in a Speedo

## ***Mr. Malcolm's List* and *Bridgerton* offer flimsy historical fantasy. *Fire Island* goes deeper.**

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [September 2022](#) issue



(From left to right) Tomas Matos, Joel Kim Booster, Conrad Ricamora, Matt Rogers, Margaret Cho, and Torian Miller in the film *Fire Island* (Photo by Jeong Park / © 2022 20th Century Studios)

Every generation deserves its own adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, and Gen Z got a gem in *Fire Island* (directed by Andrew Ahn, streaming on Hulu), which reinterprets Jane Austen's masterpiece set on the New York island known as a haven for queer culture. There is a definite leap from the carefully arranged heterosexual marriages of Austen's world to casual vacation sex (and there is a lot of explicit sex, and talk about sex, so this adaptation is probably not for the whole family), but the tensions the film explores between desire and social constraints and the quest for something real amid superficiality and display come straight from Austen's playbook.

Best friends Noah (Joel Kim Booster, who also wrote the screenplay) and Howie (Bowen Yang) stand in for sisters Elizabeth and Jane Bennet. Howie finds the hookup culture of Fire Island toxic and depressing. He is seeking, if not true love, at least mutual attraction and respect, and Noah agrees to help him find it before their vacation is over. Sparks fly when they meet Charlie (James Scully), a kind, gentle doctor. But Charlie's friends, Will (Conrad Ricamora), our tight-lipped Mr. Darcy, and their entourage—wealthier, fitter, insufferably snobby—find Noah and Howie's crew distastefully flamboyant and crass. Noah's pride and Will's prejudice launch the roller coaster enemies-to-lovers plot, which parallels Charlie and Howie's halting romance and intersects with some side stories about rakish ex-lovers and drunken foolish friends.

Like the Bennet sisters, Noah and Howie are more serious than their other "sisters," the self-involved, party-loving best friends they consider family. As Asian-American men they are much more guarded around the people who, in Noah's words, "think you have to be successful, White, and rich with 7 percent body fat to vacation on Fire Island." They both know that, for all their talk of liberation from the status quo, gay male subcultures perpetuate their own class and race hierarchies. Like a good Austen narrator laying out the rules of the marriage market in Regency England, Noah breaks down the many ways the men on Fire Island will judge each other: money and property value for sure, "but also race, masculinity, abs . . . just a few of the metrics we use to separate ourselves into upper and lower classes." And like good Austen heroines, Noah and Howie must find a way to navigate this social minefield without losing the values that define them.

*Fire Island* is part of a larger pop culture moment that is updating the tropes of Regency romance with modern ideas about race and sex. In both the new theatrical release *Mr. Malcolm's List* (directed by Emma Holly Jones) and Netflix's interracial romance juggernaut *Bridgerton* (a Shondaland production created by Chris Van Dusen), leading lords and ladies are played by actors of many races, evoking a color-blind world where eligible suitors fall madly in love regardless of skin color. And at least in *Bridgerton*, they enact the lusty culmination of their marital pursuits with decidedly unhistorical explicitness (another 19th-century romance probably not suited for the kids). In these alternative histories, lovers are still hemmed in by the demands of class, but the wagging tongues of gossipy matrons extend to characters of every race equally.

It's a flimsy historical fantasy. No attempt is made to explain, for example, how 19th-century England could have acquired the ornamental luxury that makes the period so glitzy—chintz sofas and brocade silk, delicate china and gleaming silver, gorgeous paisley wallpaper—if not through expanding empire and the colonial slave trade, realities that challenge the color-blind paradise. But as a romantic fantasy, it is still thrilling. Black and Brown bodies have long been objects of lust in White-dominated culture, but this is not quite the same thing as embodying romantic tropes like the pure-of-heart leading lady or the dashing gentleman who sweeps her off her feet. If, as we are learning more all the time, racial prejudice embeds itself in our psyches deeper than in our conscious thoughts, so too, romantic fantasies must impact our ability to feel the truth of human equality under our clothes, so to speak.

Still, *Mr. Malcolm's List* and *Bridgerton* never really transcend the realm of fantasy. The social world they depict feels like make-believe, as divorced from our own world as a counterhistory without colonialism or racism would be. In trying to make the past more palatable to contemporary desires, they end up making it feel farther away. These are worlds to escape into, not ones from which to see our own more clearly.

On the other hand, for all its seeming distance from the source material, *Fire Island* treats Austen's novel as still diagnosing something fundamentally true about the way we think and feel about love. By using Austen's source material, Booster can turn an acerbic wit on his own contemporaries in a very Austenian way. And part of the fun is just watching the parallels unfold—look how similar body-shaming dating apps are to the gossipy ballrooms of the 19th-century marriage market, how cringy is the bad behavior of family members who are both mortifying and endearing. Noah, like the Elizabeth Bennet he is channeling, tries for a long time to protect himself from the cruel hierarchies of class and race that determine who is most desirable by holding himself above it all. He has no illusions that love is a utopic force that can remake the world at will. But like a good Austen heroine, his journey is to find authentic feeling inside these very real social constraints.

Of course, for Austen the only end to this story is monogamous heterosexual marriage, which is one of the social constraints Noah and his friends are trying to resist. By using Austen's romantic tropes as a foil and a guide, Booster's adaptation helps us see how much those tropes still shape our ideas about love and romance, while also expanding the repertoire of what romance could be.