

LoveReading Reader reviews of Emma by Alexander McCall Smith

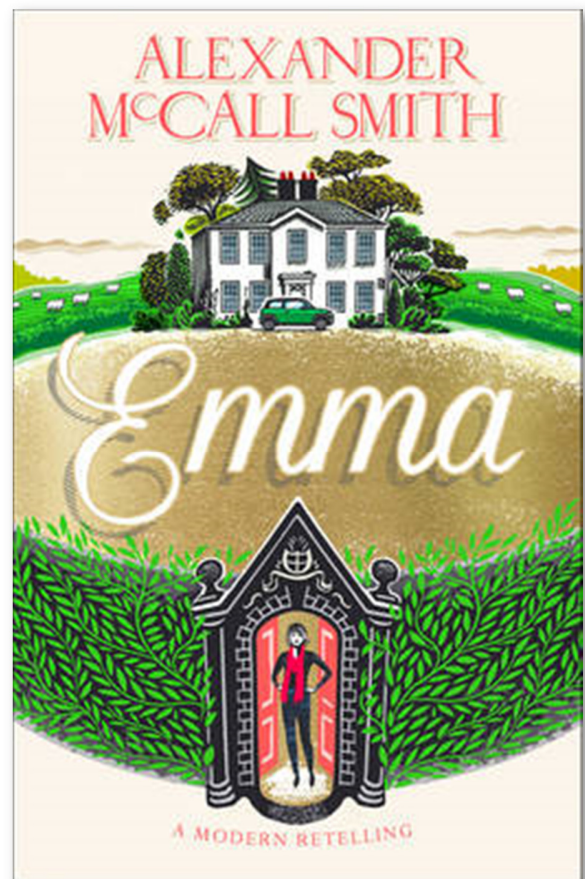
Below are the complete reviews, written by LoveReading members.

Sandra Makower

First of all, I have to put my hand and declare myself a McCall-Smith-a-phile. Ever since I entered the warm embrace of Mma Ramotswe and the other colourful personalities surrounding her No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency, I have been hooked by his affection for his characters and humanity of his style. I liken it to a cup of tea and a sit down with an old friend, or a soak in a warm tub. Bliss.

So I started his retelling of Jane Austen's 'Emma' with high hopes. And I wasn't disappointed. His warmth towards and lack of judgement of the characters shines through. It is satirical, like Austen, showing the characters foibles and idiosyncrasies, but understanding why they are like that, and rather liking them despite/because of it.

The modernising of the plot and characters are fun to spot, and so true to the original. The comic characters are just as hilarious (and sometimes excruciating). Emma is just as sure of herself and her understanding of the world. (How many of us have people like that in our lives?) The joy (and genius) of the plot being the perfect pairings we spot long before Emma has any notion of them. [SPOILER ALERT- Do you really mean you haven't read the original that has been in print for 200 years?!! - Yes, Knightly might be a bit of an old stick in the mud, but he is the perfect stability to balance out Emma's flightiness.]



*In short - go out and buy as soon as it is published. **If you love McCall Smith's writing, it's more of his pleasurable style. If you love Austen, it's a near-perfect update of one of her best loved novels. And if you're both, well like me you'll be in heaven!***

Jenny Grange

It took me a little while to appreciate the humour in this rewrite of Jane Austen's 'Emma'. There was much scene setting and character building which seemed cumbersome at times. However once Emma was back from university studying design at Bath (of course) and a dinner time conversation about evolution of Scottish sheep living on steep slopes having two legs longer on the downhill side emerged in such a ridiculously droll way that I was laughing out loud. It had echoes of Swift's Gulliver.

The original characters are all there and each given a credible modern interpretation. It was cleverly done. Emma was the character who would be most challenging and her epiphany was quickly related as falling in love seemed to cure all her snobbish selfishness at a stroke. It seemed to be more convincing in the original and of course there is little irony in this new take. She is a classic character.

*I would heartily recommend it to those who know the original story but I can't imagine reading it without that background. **I shall recommend it as the Christmas book for my book circle to enjoy the delights of Mini Coopers, Global warming, drunk driving, feigning gay-ness and Cannabis cake.***

Enjoy!

Tina

Excellent reworking of a classic, mainly amusing but also poignant at times.

When the book arrived, I was struck at the beautiful cover and the nice covering letter from the author. These lovely touches definitely made it seem even more special as a present.

I have to admit that although I knew the story of Emma, I hadn't actually read Jane Austen's book all the way through. Although Alexander McCall Smith's reworking really brought the work up-to-date, at the same time it emphasised

the timeless themes of the classic novel.

Probably as to be expected, I did find Emma rather annoying and didn't really warm to her as a character. However, this did not make the book less readable. In fact, it was so easy to read that I read the whole book in an evening and it has now encouraged me to read the original.

Since reading the book, I have also borrowed Val McDermid's version of 'Northanger Abbey' and looking forward to other books as part of the Austen Project.

Sarah Musk

A really enjoyable modern version of Jane Austen's Emma. It stays true to the original story and to Emma's very original nature.

I wasn't sure whether I would enjoy this book. I love Jane Austen and, in particular, Emma, who I have always thought was a very interesting character in that she was so human. I do have to say though that I really enjoyed this book. Alexander McCall Smith's writing has a witty, light touch which suits the story.

Emma is not exactly a bad character but she is very exasperating and annoying at times and, even though she basically has good intentions, there are occasions when you cringe for her and this is the basis of how well it is written. The author carries you along with Emma's blunders, misapprehensions and sometimes downright rudeness and you still like her and are rooting for her. She is no heroine but is a proper well-rounded human being and I love Jane Austen for producing her and Alexander McCall Smith for staying so true to the original story but also to Emma's bossy, interfering ways.

Jane Austen is difficult to match since she wrote such marvellous novels about human nature but this version of 'Emma' does justice to both Jane and Emma.

Rebecca Whymark

An easy sedate read, perfect beach read.

Having not read Jane Austen's 'Emma' I am unable to compare the two books side by side, however this version didn't knock my socks off. It was a slow sedate read that I found frustrating at times. I found that the language used was not in my opinion in keeping with a modern retelling. Apart from the occasional mention of emails, texts and modern cars you could almost forget the story is

supposed to be set in modern times. This would be a good book for when you don't fancy a challenging read. I'm glad I was given the chance to read and review this but I won't be picking up any of Alexander McCall Smith's books in the near future.

Nikki Whitmore

A witty, easy to read update of a classic novel.

Of all of Austen's novels, I think 'Emma' is probably the one that works best transplanted into a modern setting. It's the story least bound by social conventions and has a main character who is much less restricted than the other Austen women. That being said, it's still quite difficult to make some of the pieces fit into a 21st century puzzle and some of the modern alternations did sit a bit awkwardly for me (Frank Churchill's behaviour especially). Some, however, worked brilliantly – how the Bates' ended up in reduced circumstances for example - and I loved the little addition to both Harriet and Mr Woodhouse's stories at the end. All in all, I did enjoy McCall Smith's retelling of the story. It was very easy to read and did made me laugh out loud on occasion – I do think there should have been a little more Mr Knightley though. There should always be more Mr Knightley!

Julie Wragg

A fun and entertaining re-working of a classic.

Emma is a rich, spoilt young woman, fresh from university and back in Norfolk where she enjoys being a big fish in a tiny pond.

The idea of getting well known authors to re-work Austen's novels into a modern setting is a tricky one. The focus on class and the responsibilities of those with money has less importance and so Emma's interfering seems less plausible. Emma as a character provokes strong reactions and although her spoilt and manipulative traits remain at the core of the story it is less clear why she is so loved by those that know her.

What I did enjoy is that McCall Smith begins before the original and shows Emma's growing up. However, I think many of the characters lost depth became over simplified. Harriet remains annoying, now a pretty airhead rather than an impoverished naïve innocent. George Knightley is a man of his time and I don't think he transfers well.

Despite my reservations, Mr Woodhouse is wonderfully drawn and all his neuroses transfer well into today and Miss Taylor as the governess from Edinburgh, who is sharper and less tolerant of Emma's faults and is a typically delightful McCall Smith creation.

It's not perfect but I did enjoy this book. It's a light, entertaining read and there are glimmers of true McCall Smith warmth that echo his Mma Ramotswe novels.

Lynne Rapson

An interesting update on the classic story by Jane Austen told in his unmistakable style.

This is an update of a favourite book of mine so I was fascinated to see how it would unfold. I'm a lover of Jane Austen's writing, and a fan of Alexander McCall Smith's 'Mma Ramotswe' stories.

Most of the original Emma characters are there, just in a different place and time, with their stories amusingly modernised. They were all completely recognizable. Emma was very well drawn and her obsession with matchmaking still very present. Much was made of Mr Woodhouse and his quirks and fancies. Some of the characters were a little under used but it did not matter at all. I found the whole book an entertaining read and would recommend it even to diehard Janeites (I am a member of the Jane Austen society so I know who I'm talking about!) Read it and then if you've not read Jane's original version, try that also.

Elaine Simpson-Long - <http://randomjottings.typepad.com>

This is the latest in the rather grandly named 'The Austen Project'. I read 'Sense and Sensibility' by Joanna Trollope which I quite enjoyed, but 'Northanger Abbey' by Val McDermid I abandoned half way through as I found it so tedious. However, I was rather looking forward to 'Emma' as I do like Alexander McCall Smith and his writing and I had high hopes for his take on Miss Woodhouse. This is the best of the three so far published, largely due to the warm and gentle writing though he does not let up on Emma and her interfering ways. The trouble is that characteristics and attitudes that are OK in Austen sound and look odd in the light of modern day though he does deal Mr Woodhouse and his paranoia about his health is dealt with in an amusing and subtle way.

This is a book I read one Sunday afternoon with a cup of tea to hand and a biscuit. I enjoyed it in a mild way and it passed a relaxed hour or two, but is totally unmemorable. I kept thinking of the sharp wit of the original and wondered why some bright spark thought it necessary to update these timeless and perfect books. If a demonstration was needed that Jane Austen's work and its plots and characters are as relevant today as the day they were written, well we Janeites already know this.

I assume that the main reason for this Project was money. I am rather wondering what the remaining three titles will be like.....

Maxine Broadbent

This is a 'curl up in an armchair and forget everything else' kind of book. I enjoyed it enormously. A wonderful retelling of 'Emma' but it really does stand alone.

This is a 'curl up in an armchair and forget everything else' kind of book - something you can really relax into and it leaves you feeling good. I enjoyed it enormously. Telling the story of Jane Austen's 'Emma' in the modern age is an engaging idea and Alexander McCall has succeeded perfectly. The novel does not read like a parody. The characters are real individuals with strengths and weaknesses. Their dreams and practicalities are engagingly described I read almost the whole book with a smile on my face. Each chapter is full of sharp, humorous, but never unkind affectionate observations about human behaviour. The satisfying plot of the novel is well known to some but not others. Read it whether you have read the original 'Emma' or not.

Barbara Goldie

A great combination, a great classic, reworked by a great author!

*A very entertaining read. The book has a lovely cover and feel to it, lovely to pick up and open. Once opened it did not disappoint, the ageless story of Emma by Jane Austen modernised by, in my opinion, one of the best writers today. The characters were brought into the modern world with subtle changes some things felt as if they were left in the Austen world and it worked very well for me. I found it light and entertaining, humorous and clever. I still like Emma and still find her very frustrating. Mr Woodhouse still has his odd ways and fits in well with the modern version. It is a slow leisurely read just the kind of book to immerse yourself in; even so I read it in a couple of sittings. **I would***

recommend it for your Christmas list or an early Christmas present for the cold winter evenings. A great read!

Julie Bickerdyke

A Jane Austen classic treated the utmost respect and masterfully retold in a modern setting.

As a Jane Austen fan I was not disappointed, in fact I thoroughly enjoyed this book.

Alexander McCall Smith has done a wonderful job of updating the lovely story of Emma, the well-meaning but interfering and meddling young woman.

In this version Emma is just as annoying as I remembered her and you really cringe at some of her actions and thoughtlessness.

Of course she learns the error of her ways in the end

I thoroughly enjoyed this version and raced through the book.

It is a comfortable, pleasant read; very funny in places - just as the original was.

Helen Treadwell

I was pleased that Alexander McCall Smith had been chosen to update 'Emma' as I thought his style would be perfect and Emma is my favourite Austen novel.

I have to reluctantly admit I have been disappointed. The book starts by giving information about Mr Woodhouse's background - detail which I thought was irrelevant.

The basic plot is exactly the same although I found Emma more unlikeable than in Austen's version. Austen skillfully managed to make Emma an appealing character despite her flaws (which in fact make her more human) but here Emma just appears to be a spoilt madam with no redeeming features.

One of my favourite elements of the original novel is the romantic tension which builds between Emma and George Knightly but this is missing here.

I am not sure that any other current author could have done a better job, perhaps it is just unfair to expect any author to update a classic, well-loved book. McCall Smith is a talented writer and I enjoyed the wit he brought to the

novel but I will enjoy his original stories more.

I think the main problem with this book is that the characters and storyline just don't work in 2014; they are very much of their time. Read the original instead!

Julie Collins

True to the original, Emma can't seem to stop interfering in other peoples' affairs but despite the problems she causes for others, the reader cannot help hoping for a happy ending.

If you've read Austen's original, 'Emma' will need no introduction.

After University she returns to Norfolk and talks about setting up an interior design business however, she doesn't leave herself much time for the business due to her penchant for arranging dinner parties and picnics for friends and neighbours. Not to mention drawing a portrait, telling whilst not quite lies, certainly misleading tales about some of her so called friends, always with the best of intentions- or so she would have us believe. But is her concern genuine? Will her friends and neighbours forgive her?

Emma is a busy body but does also try to do some good. It is perhaps because of this, that she maintains the readers sympathy throughout. Despite seeing the repercussions of her misdeeds, we cannot wish her ill and are rooting for her own happy ending.

Charlie Pritchard-Williams.

I must have read 'Emma' by Jane Austen at least four times, once at school and at least three more as an adult, there is something about Emma's busy body, matchmaking personality that I like.

I've also read at least 4 or 5 of the 'No 1 ladies detective agency' series that the author wrote previously, I really enjoyed them too, so I was quite excited to receive a copy of this.

I think Mr. McCall Smith managed to tie in the modern day with the original book quite well, I kept forgetting that it was set in the world of social media and email. I guess the fact that she was still very rich and had no need for real work helped with that, it gave it a real sense of olde-worlde. In one sentence they talk about how far it is to travel to London from Highgate (a mere 20 mins on the tube) or how the nephews need to come out to the country to get some fresh air

at Highgate! and then all of sudden Emma is driving her shiny Mini around and buying her fake-friend Harriet expensive clothes from fashionable shops. I felt myself jumping back and forth from the original to the modern constantly and not necessarily in a bad way.

I guess if I'm completely honest I would of liked Emma to have been slightly more modern, perhaps she could of worked in an office and her matchmaking could of happened there, perhaps Mr Knightly could of been her boss or the owner of the local wine bar or perhaps just something to make it more believable, after all his brother was apparently a successful photographer.

*I think I just would have liked it to have been a bit more something (though I'm not entirely sure what that something is) but something more. **I did really enjoy it, I found myself looking forward to the main plot twists and turns that were coming**, the fact that the vicar would have read her signs wrong, the fact that she would inevitably insult Miss Bates and of course that she would eventually fall in love with Mr. Knightly, of course, who wouldn't.*

I would have liked a bit more of Mr. Knightly's Mr. Knightliness (if you know what I mean) but perhaps that only comes from a female writer.