

THE
Jane Austen
SERIES

First Impressions

A CONTEMPORARY RETELLING OF
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE



DEBRA WHITE SMITH



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Bethany House edition published 2018

Previously published by Harvest House Publishers.

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN 978-0-7642-3067-7

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Control Number: 2017961597

Pride and Prejudice quotes are taken from Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* in *The Complete Novels of Jane Austen*, vol. 1 (New York: Modern Library, 1992).

Cover design by Connie Gabbert

Author represented by Alive Literary Agency

For Dr. Michael Murphy,
the professor who
first introduced me
to Jane Austen.

Cast



Calvin Barclay: Based on Charles Bingley from *Pride and Prejudice*. Dave Davidson's good friend and a veterinarian in London, Texas.

Carissa Barclay: Based on Caroline Bingley from *Pride and Prejudice*. Like most of the single women in London, Texas, Carissa would be thrilled to marry Dave Davidson.

Cheri Locaste: Based on Charlotte Lucas from *Pride and Prejudice*. Eddi Boswick's friend, Cheri is a no-nonsense pragmatic who has never been accused of being a romantic, or being spontaneous. She teaches English at London High School.

Conner Boswick: Based on Mr. Collins from *Pride and Prejudice*. Conner is an eligible bachelor and vice president of Boswick Oil in Houston, Texas.

Dave Davidson: Based on Mr. Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice*. Dave owns a ranch outside of London, Texas. Handsome and untamed, he fends off the numerous women eager to make his acquaintance . . . and so much more.

Eddi Boswick: Based on Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*. The middle Boswick daughter, Eddi moves to London, Texas, to start her new law practice. Brilliant yet practical, she isn't expecting to have her world shaken by love.

Edward Boswick: Based on Mr. Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*. The Boswick patriarch, Edward chose his own career over a life in high society as a family employee of Boswick Oil. Edward lives in Houston with his wife, Mary.

George Wallace: Based on Georgianna Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice*. George is Dave Davidson's younger brother.

Jenny Boswick: Based on Jane Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*. The eldest Boswick daughter, Jenny is a community college coach who lives north of Houston in The Woods, Texas.

Linda Boswick: Based on Lydia Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*. The youngest Boswick daughter, Linda's goal in life is to be the life of the party.

Madelynne DeBloom: Based on Lady Catherine de Bourgh from *Pride and Prejudice*. Dave Davidson's aunt, Mrs. DeBloom is the owner of the community theater, which is operated in her mansion named Huntington House. Mrs. DeBloom stepped in as Dave's mother when his parents were killed.

Mary Boswick: Based on Mrs. Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*. The Boswick matriarch, Mary is a high-strung woman who majors in complaining about her nerves and trying to manipulate her daughters' love lives. She lives in Houston with her husband, Edward.

Rick Wallace: Based on Mr. Wickham from *Pride and Prejudice*. Rick enjoys making himself look much better than he is. The woman he's interested in is usually the one who is closest. He is a policeman in Houston, Texas, and a foster "cousin" to Dave Davidson.

One



“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” Madelynne DeBloom looked up from reading aloud from her cherished copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. She glanced around the Victorian mansion’s parlor.

Eddi Boswick languidly shifted in the velvet-covered settee and followed the aging woman’s gaze. It fell smack on her nephew, Dave Davidson. He owned a four-hundred-acre ranch outside London, Texas, and just happened to be single. By the resigned looks of the dark-haired, boot-clad cowboy, he was not thrilled to be cooped up half the day with a bunch of literary types. He narrowed his right eye and smirked as if the *last* thing he wanted was a wife—despite Jane Austen and any female in town.

Mrs. DeBloom, tall and thin and aristocratic, continued reading as if her nephew agreed. “However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.”

Mrs. DeBloom laid her book on the Queen Anne tea table by which she stood. The smell of her ever-present Tea Rose perfume commanded the air around her just as the lady commanded the

group. This time her haughty blue gaze fell upon Eddi like a vulture pinpointing her prey.

“Miss Boswick,” she began in a shrill voice, “from what I understand, you constructed a Master’s thesis on Jane Austen. Would you care to expound on Austen’s opening lines from *Pride and Prejudice*?”

“Well . . .” Eddi coughed and glanced around the room.

All twenty people observed her as if she were the small town’s literary guru—everyone except Dave Davidson. That gentleman had apparently endured enough bookish musings this lazy Saturday morning. He’d pulled out his smartphone and was examining the screen as if reviewing a schedule.

Eddi tried to dismiss Mrs. DeBloom’s sullen nephew. But *he* was the one who seized her attention. The irony was that Eddi had never been arrested by the cowboy type. Rumor had it, his wealthy aunt even purchased his ranch for him.

She pinched the seam in the settee and tried to concentrate on the question before her. “Well . . .” she repeated. “Of course, Austen created the epitome of romantic comedies. Her commentary on society was not only subtle, it was brilliant.” Eddi waved her hand, “Her opening lines are a clear example of her subtle humor.”

She cut a glance back to Dave. His indolent yawning reminded her of a long-maned, sepia-eyed lion who ruled his den—except this lion wore blue jeans with a hole in one knee and a faded denim shirt that had suffered hundreds of washes. Dave’s face scrunched as he rubbed work-worn fingers along his shadowed jaw. He shook his head and swiped the smartphone’s screen.

The lion needs a haircut . . . and a shave . . . and some lessons in being more polite, Eddi thought. In the times she had seen Dave around town and at church, she deduced much the same about him. He never looked or acted much differently, even at Sunday morning services.

She glanced back to Mrs. DeBloom. The lady's right eye twitched. Eddi figured she was ready for the complete answer.

"What Jane Austen is saying," Eddi rushed and forced her attention to the issue at hand, "is that when a single man of large fortune moves to a neighborhood, the women in the community will assume he is looking for or in need of a wife—whether he really is or not."

An unceremonious comment spewed from the jeans-clad lion, "You can say *that* again!"

Caution suggested Eddi shouldn't look at Dave. She joined the room's occupants and looked anyway. His cynical appraisal rested upon Eddi.

"Whats the matter, Dave?" a masculine voice called from across the parlor. "The ladies been husslin' ya lately?"

Eddi tried to follow the voice to a man who sounded like the new church youth director. Her perusal was interrupted when a nearby college man said, "Poor baby."

In the seat next to Dave, Calvin Barclay erupted into good-natured guffaws. The fair-haired veterinarian whacked his friend on the back. "Would that we were all so tormented."

Dave's face settled into a hard-lipped scowl. He shoved the phone into his shirt pocket, rose from the straight-backed chair, and marched from the room. His snake-skin boots clipped against the polished wooden floor with the rhythm of a horse's canter. Head high, he looked as if he belonged in a royal procession, with himself in the lead, naturally.

You don't have to worry about me, Mister, Eddi thought as Mrs. DeBloom cleared her throat. *I'm not in the market for the arrogant, untamed type—no matter how much money he has . . . or how nice his hair is . . . or his eyes . . . or his build.* Eddi frowned at the last glimpse of his broad shoulders. Dave Davidson was *not* her type—not even a little.

"As you were saying, Eddi?" The town's self-appointed

cultural guardian shoved a pointed look at her nephew's retreating back.

"Actually, I . . . I was pretty much through, so I guess I'll just rest my case," she said with a faint smile and a demure downward glance at the oriental rug.

Calvin's chuckle escalated into outright laughter. "Oh, I get it!" he said. "I rest my case . . . and you're a lawyer! Ha! What a hoot!"

Eddi appraised Calvin and wondered how the easygoing veterinarian could be such good friends with someone as sullen and proud as Dave Davidson.

A round of chortles scurried across a room that was replete with a marble fireplace and French antiques. Eddi picked up her cup of cinnamon tea, rested her lips against the china rim, and sipped the inviting liquid. As the sweet warmth slipped down her throat, she basked in the general acceptance from the surrounding participants. After six months of hard labor, London, Texas, was finally acknowledging Eddi as part of the community.

The first few weeks after she opened her law practice, she had wondered whether or not she could succeed in such a town. More than once a good ol' boy from the neighborhood traipsed into her office, took one look at the young blond female behind the desk, and asked to see the lawyer. When Eddi informed them that *she* was the lawyer—not the secretary—several of them banged out of the office. In this part of the woods, nineteenth-century attitudes thrived unchecked.

Maybe Jane Austen won't be too much of a stretch for them, Eddi thought.

Surprisingly, Mrs. DeBloom had procured a solid crowd this June morning to discuss the new community play based on *Pride and Prejudice*. The town had been buzzing all week about who would be cast in the different roles. Madelynn DeBloom, the

theater's sponsor, would announce her cast choices at the first practice in two weeks.

Eddi was hoping to play the part of Jane Bennet, the supporting role and sister of the book's heroine, Elizabeth Bennet. But Eddi would be happy for whatever part might befall her. Any hobby would help ease the boredom after she closed her office every day. While Eddi had managed to solicit some clients, business was still far from booming.

A rumble of thunder rolled across the mansion as rain pelted the roof.

"Aunt Maddy," Dave's call floated from the entryway. "Tammy says the brunch is ready."

Eddi glimpsed Dave at the parlor's opening before he removed his broad-shouldered self back to the dining room.

"Well, that would be good timing." Mrs. DeBloom nodded and shifted the lace collar on her straight floral dress. "I can't talk over this rain anyway." She looked past the top of her reading glasses and peered out the window behind Eddi's head.

"We've been under a tornado watch all morning," she continued. "Let's hope it's not upgraded to a warning."

The group collectively scrutinized the gray pall shrouding the classic neighborhood. Eddi had learned last fall that tornadoes were a common threat in east Texas. Few residents took tornado watches lightly.

"Let's adjourn to the dining room, shall we?" Mrs. DeBloom suggested, her troubled gaze never leaving the window.

The room's occupants shuffled to their feet as Eddi settled her cup back into its saucer, set it on the coffee table, and stood.

She wasted no time joining the crowd and filling her plate in the buffet line. She caught a glimpse of Dave and Calvin heading through the kitchen toward the back door. A porch that wrapped around the back and side of the house waited on the other side. Eddi looked out one of the floor-to-ceiling windows

to note that the rain had stopped as quickly as it started. Only a fine mist now caressed the yard full of lush oaks. The air took on a surreal pink glow that hinted of another storm brewing. Her plate of finger foods in hand, she decided that accessing the porch's side through the parlor's French doors would provide a safe distance from the two men.

Her grumbling stomach dictated haste, so Eddi hurried through the parlor and opened the French doors. Ensnared in the scent of fresh honeysuckle, she stepped onto the porch and gingerly dodged puddles along the floor. Several wicker chairs and snack tables lined the porch. Eddi settled into the seat nearest the door because the chair cushion was dry.

Mrs. DeBloom's home sat atop a small hill, just inside the city limits. Her peach orchard was situated just outside the city limits. The mansion—traditionally dubbed Huntington House—overlooked London and served as a regal focal point for the citizenry.

Eddi took a bite of one of the finger sandwiches. Enjoying the delightful taste of chicken mixed with pineapple and pecans, she eyed the weather. In the distance, twin gigantic thunderheads sent towering plumes into the sky. They resembled two boxers squared off for a fight. Eddi squinted and strained to listen for any thunder. A curtain that looked like fog hung between rows of peach trees a quarter mile away.

"Must be more rain," Eddi mumbled between bites of crisp broccoli coated in ranch dip.

The air was as still as Sam Houston's statue on the town square and held so much moisture it could be squeezed out by hand. Eddi eyed the distant rolling hills covered in pine trees and ample grass. The emerald carpet attested to the frequent rains that had characterized late May and early June.

"This looks like a good spot," a deep voice drawled from around the corner. "At least the cushions are dry."

The voice belonged to the exact man she wanted to avoid.

Eddi cringed and glanced over her left shoulder. While her chair hugged the wall, the dining set around the corner sat closer to the bannister. She caught intermittent glimpses of masculine legs as two men settled into side-by-side chairs.

“Yes, dry cushions. What a concept!” Calvin Barclay agreed. “I’m going straight home as soon as I can get outta here and change pants. Why didn’t you *tell* me I was going to sit in a puddle of water?”

“I tried, you idiot!” Dave chided. “You were too busy looking at the clouds to listen to me.” A scrape and thud suggested one of the men had scooted a wicker chair after sitting in it.

“I’m telling you, man, those clouds look evil. There is a tornado watch on. I don’t like this pink business, either. Have you forgotten? Last time the air looked like this, we wound up with a tornado. Even though the thing skipped over London, a tornado is a tornado. And I think I smell one!”

Two pairs of legs remained visible around the corner. At the end of one pair Eddi observed cowboy boots sticking out of jeans frayed at the hem. The other pair of legs ended with a brown leather loafer on the right foot. The left foot rested on the table’s lower rail and sported a tan sock with a large hole at the toe. The missing shoe lay on the floor beneath Calvin’s foot.

“I thought Aunt Maddy was going to have some real food,” Dave complained. “I could go for some barbeque and potato salad.”

“When have you ever known any meeting like this to have real food?” Calvin answered. “It’s the stuff artsy chick parties are made of, man.”

A companionable silence settled upon the men, and Eddi imagined they were devouring the very eats they’d just complained of. She debated whether to ease into the parlor or stay put. Eddi’s attention was teased back to the men. Her stomach fluttered.

Better go back inside, she thought and wished for her elder sister, Jenny. A good dose of Jenny's common sense would end Eddi's distraction for a man as suited for her as hay string for lilies. Besides, Eddi doubted Dave even knew her name. The times she encountered him, he acted as if Eddi were a local farmer in overalls rather than a tall blond female dressed in her finest city gear.

Eddi screwed the lid off her bottled water and downed a swallow of the cool liquid. A faint trace of ozone mingled with the smell of honeysuckle and fresh rain. Eddi observed the approaching storm with new interest. The curtain of rain neared. The sound of rushing droplets the thunderhead promised, now inky and swirling, was leveling a path toward London. Her hand paused on the edge of her plate as she reflected upon Calvin's tornado worries.

With a wrinkle of her nose, she shook her head. *It's just more rain*, she insisted and stood up to go back into the mansion. But Calvin's humor-filled jibe halted Eddi's progress.

"So, are you going to sign up for the play?"

"Remember, I just came to watch you make a fool of yourself," Dave said in a flat tone that brooked no argument.

"Yep—and because your aunt would have *killed* you if you didn't show."

"Gotta keep my main lady happy," Dave acquiesced. "But it only goes so far."

"I hear she wants you to play Darcy."

"Who's Darcy?" Dave asked.

Eddi rolled her eyes. "He just happens to be one of the most famous heroes of all classic literature," she mouthed.

"You slay me, man," Calvin said through a chortle. "Darcy is the hero of *Pride and Prejudice*—uh, you know, the play your aunt's putting together. I'm sure Mrs. DeBloom thinks you're hopeless."

“Pretty much—and proud of it,” he affirmed. “Last thing I need is more culture. I’ve had my fill of it.”

“Ah, come on,” Calvin urged. “You need to be in this play. The exposure will do you good. I promise, when you enter that first scene as Darcy, every single woman in the audience will want your autograph after opening night.”

“Oh, brother,” Eddi murmured.

“That’s the last thing I need right now,” Dave retorted.

“Ah, yes, I remember. You’re the guy with all the ladies chasing you.”

“I’ve learned it’s smart to lie low in this town, that’s all I’m saying. These local women must not get out much. They act like I must be dying to get married next weekend. To put it bluntly, I haven’t seen one around here who’s caught my eye enough to let her put a matrimonial noose around *my* neck.”

“Whoa, now!” Calvin’s foot found its loafer. “What about the new lady lawyer? What’s her name . . . Eddi, Eddi Boswick. That woman is class personified.”

Warmth rushed over Eddi as she anticipated Dave’s response. She sat back down, forgot all about her sister Jenny, and negated every scrap of common sense. Her sole concern became whether or not the attractive rancher found her worth pursuing.

If he does, she thought with a sly grin, *maybe I won’t be so hard to catch*. Eddi scooted back in her chair.

“So, aren’t you going to say anything?” Calvin prodded.

“I hadn’t planned on it,” Dave retorted.

A cautious precognition suggested Eddi should stop eavesdropping. She rubbed her fingertips along the buttons on her linen jacket. A daredevil streak challenged her to ignore caution just this once.

What has caution gotten me so far? she asked. *An empty townhouse with a dog pound refugee and two resentful felines to keep me warm at night*. She crossed her legs and gazed past the honeysuckle-

laden trellis to a woodpecker that was determined to pound his beak into the oak at the porch's corner. All the while she pined for any signal of interest from the renegade rancher.

"Oh, so we're not commenting on the lawyer?" Calvin teased. "Why not?"

Dave remained silent. Eddi looked down and pulled at the top of a piece of broccoli.

"What's the matter?" Calvin blurted. "Are you afraid of her?"

A caustic laugh bounced around the porch. "Yeah, right," Dave retorted.

"Or maybe you're worried she's too smart for you! Ha!" Calvin laughed. "That's a good one."

Eddi snapped her attention from the broccoli to the porch's corner. Calvin slid his chair back and his legs disappeared.

"Oh, shut up," Dave grouched. "If you must know, Eddi Boswick would have to be way more classy to keep my attention for long. In the first place, she's too short."

Eddi's mouth fell open. *Short!* she thought. *I'm nearly five foot nine!*

Calvin snorted. "She's as tall as I am."

"You're too short, too," Dave shot back.

"It's a good thing, 'cause I'm not going out with you!"

"And she's too prissy for my taste," Dave added as if his friend had never cracked the joke.

Prissy! Eddi's warmth from Calvin's praise escalated into heat. Her curiosity ignited in ire. Her rebel interest in Dave plummeted to a crashing death.

"Yep, too prissy," Dave added more firmly. "And—and since she's a lawyer . . . you know the type . . . she probably runs off at the mouth day and night and likes to pick fights wherever she can find them."

Eddi clenched her fists in her lap. The corners of her mouth turned down. Her eyes narrowed.

“I bet she even wears combat boots to bed!” Dave complained. “Combat boots!” she hissed. Eddi stood and stepped toward the men.

A gust of humid wind whipped around the porch and swept her plastic fork across the wicker table. Mrs. DeBloom’s empty garbage can crashed into the street and rolled to the hill’s precipice. Eddi’s concern for the weather postponed her spontaneous urge to defend herself.

She glanced skyward. A mile away, curling patches of clouds jabbed at each other, and the pink hue phased into gray-green. The neighbor’s basset hound started a mournful howl an acre away.

“So I guess you’re waiting on one of those long-legged city women who stands six feet tall and looks like she stepped off the pages of *Cosmopolitan* magazine.” Calvin’s latest claim diverted Eddi back to the insufferable conversation around the corner.

Eddi inspected her slender legs that protruded from the tailored city shorts just above her knees. A pair of high-heeled sandals wrapped her narrow feet. She thought the outfit was classy, even if the high and mighty Dave Davidson did not.

Okay, so these legs aren’t going to get me on the cover of Cosmopolitan, she had to admit. But they were good enough for a regional championship in cross country . . . and third place in state.

“I’m not so picky that I want a supermodel sort,” Dave remarked after a pause. “But the ladies are going to have to get better than London’s selection before I think of settling down. If I ever *do* decide to spend my time with a lady, she’s going to have to like me for who I am, *not* what I own. And she’ll have to be interested in more than keeping up with her friends’ weddings or who’s going to be football sweetheart this year.”

“Why don’t you just marry your Aunt Maddy, then?” Calvin asked. “She seems really broad-minded, and I think she’d love you if you were broke and starving.”

Eddi chuckled. *I like you, Calvin Barclay*, she thought.

“Oh, get outta here, will ya?” Dave barked. “Give it a rest. What’s gotten into you, anyway? You’re starting to sound like Aunt Maddy. She’s always trying to get me married off—but she’s determined it should be to an aristocratic sort who will understand my ‘position’ in life.” His voice took on a falsetto mockery then turned to a low growl. “Namely, her best friend’s daughter.”

“I really wish you’d give the attorney a chance. I bet she’d give you a run for your money on anything you want to discuss, and turn your cowboy brain inside out before you knew what hit ya.”

How about an internship with a leading barrister in the real London, buddy? Eddi placed a hand on her hip. *Or six weeks in the Amazon jungle helping a Bible translator? I bet there’s nothing in your cow pastures that can match that!* She sat back down and decided not to waste her time confronting Dave Davidson. He wasn’t worth the energy.

“If you’re so impressed with the attorney, Calvin, why don’t you ask her out,” Dave challenged, “and leave me in peace?”

Eddi’s eyes rounded. She scrutinized a puddle of water on the porch’s slick, gray surface. She and Calvin had shared several pleasant conversations around town, but she never considered him more than a friend. Interestingly enough, Eddi suspected Calvin sensed the lack of chemistry, as well. She had even wondered if her sister Jenny might like to meet him, but Jenny had been seeing Hal Gomez for months now.

“Ah, I don’t know,” Calvin hedged. “I don’t think I’m her type.”

“Oh, and you think *I* am? Please, don’t flatter me!” Dave added with a sarcastic twist. “Besides all that, why don’t *you* try out for the part of Darby?”

“That’s *Darcy*,” Calvin said, his words thick with laughter.

“Whatever,” Dave drawled.

“Really, if you don’t think you’re going to try out, I believe I will.”

“Be my guest,” Dave agreed. “Maybe you’ll get lucky and the lawyer will play the leading lady.”

“One day, you’re going to regret this attitude,” Calvin prophesied. “Mark my word, before the summer’s over, I predict you’ll be on your knees begging her—”

Dave’s scornful jeer hurled Eddi into action. *Enough is enough!* she thought. *Even though I’m not going to confront the jerk, I don’t have to sit here and listen to this a minute longer!* She snatched up her plate and bottled water, stood, and cast a final glance toward the approaching storm.

She had been so focused on the conversation she failed to realize the wind had stopped blowing and an eerie silence permeated the countryside—a silence broken only by the basset hound’s worried whines. The thunderhead, once safely in the distance, now bore down upon the outskirts of London like a blackish-green omen of doom.

The curtain of rain in the peach orchard oscillated as a snake-like tail, white as cotton, dipped from the sky, stirred up a cloud of debris, and hurled peach trees into the air.

Eddi dropped her plate and water bottle. A gurgled exclamation parted her lips as the funnel zipped back into the clouds.

A hard-line wind swooshed into the deathly silence with a gust that whipped at Eddi’s French braid and shoved her linen jacket away from her body. The snaky tail dipped to earth again. A trainlike roar testified to the beast’s evil intent as it tore a jagged path toward the mansion.