

## In Memory of Universal Truth

*First comes a standalone story from Chris Parsons' reality. Although related to the novel, it can be safely read independently, containing no spoilers. In Memory of Universal Truth tells the tale of how the movie that's being filmed whenever Chris visits Erica Immurson in Lacock came into being.*

*It's a light-hearted opener, different to much that follows, so don't get too used to it. With apologies to Jane Austen.*

\*

*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single producer in possession of a good idea, must be in want of a script.*

Look, I know that's a cliché, but if it's good enough for *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies*, then it'll do for my personal brain dumps.

It's a great day! Just when my life was falling apart, just when I wasn't sure when my next income was coming in, the opportunity of a lifetime dropped into my lap – and it's all thanks to Jane Austen.

I should go back to how this all started, back to the beginning of my career as a lowly staff writer working in the writers' room of a long-defunct, unlamented TV series. I'd struck up a friendship with the supervising producer after he caught me reading my battered copy of *Pride and Prejudice* during a break. I try to re-read it at least once a year as a reminder of *how things should be done*.

It turns out we shared a passion for the novel and had the same burning desire – to create the definitive cinematic version. I reckon the BBC's TV series from the end of the last century is unlikely to be bettered in capturing the essence of the story, but I don't believe there's been a movie version that's fully done it justice. It's a huge challenge to trim the right parts of the story to fit a sensible running time without removing its soul. There may have been some valiant efforts, but nobody's tamed the Darcy yet.

We've crossed paths several times in our careers since then in other writers' rooms and always revisited the same conversation. It was a fun, wistful distraction to bounce ideas off each other.

Of course, he's gone on to greater things since then, making his name as the director of smart, low-budget horror movies. They're not really my thing, and although I can appreciate the craft involved, it's hard to square the man who made them with the person who loved *P&P*. *P&P&Z* maybe, but not Jane's masterpiece.

Then, out of the blue today, I received an email from him with the subject line *Pride and Prejudice: The Definitive Edition*. Yes, he's going to make it! Indeed he's going to be both producer and director of the project – and wants me to develop the script.

Me. Develop the script.

Yes, you heard that right. Even more amazingly, he's going to pay me for it. I mean, if I had the money, I'd have paid him for the chance, but I'm not going to tell him that in case he decides to do it for himself. I'm sure he'd prefer to, but he's too much else on his plate right now.

The initial funding is apparently in place, and Netflix is tentatively interested already. All he needs for now is a decent treatment to take it to the next stage, which is a doddle. It's not as if I haven't written several already in my spare time. He gave me some notes – including not to feel restrained by the running time – so it didn't take long to select the best starting point, knock it into shape, and send it to him.

I know I haven't signed a contract yet, but it's worth the risk. I'm sure he'll pay me for it. I'm now sitting in purgatory, waiting for feedback.

\*

*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single producer in possession of a good treatment, must be in want of changes.*

Well, that wasn't quite what I expected. Allegedly, he loved it, but he's been talking to the money men who 'have a few concerns.' Of course they do.

Apparently, what's needed is something with a more contemporary feel. I mean, so why are they making *Pride and Prejudice* in the first place? Still, I'm not giving up hope yet. I'm sure I can persuade them to see sense and think it was their own idea.

He's not given me much to go on but wants to add overt themes to the major characters to resonate more directly with a modern-day audience. They'd be happy to set the movie in a later period if it helped...

OK, so I'll bite my tongue and try to be constructive. If I can add a few background details that could be easily excised at a later date, it might mean we can move forward. Let's start with dear Lizzy Bennet.

I feel dirty already.

The least damaging idea so far is to have Lizzy sat at her writing desk, penning letters to newspapers campaigning for women's equality. Look, I know that's naff, and the form may change depending on what period this ends up being set, but at least she's not doing Lizzy Bennet's Diaries on YouTube. Yet.

I'm nervously awaiting feedback again. The flavour of my trepidation has bitter tang this time around.

\*

*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single author in possession of a good flat, must be in want of an income.*

It was as I feared. He loved the idea. In fact, he wants her feminism to be even more radical and explicit. I'll ignore that for now and concentrate on the next target of reinvention: Mr Darcy.

Sigh.

Honestly, if this were a couple of years ago when life was more comfortable, I'd have pulled out at this stage. Things have been a bit tight since my divorce though. I love my new flat and really don't want to move, but am struggling to afford the rent right now. I'll have to

play along for a bit longer, dropping a not too unsubtle hint that I need paying for what I've done already, and quickly.

What can we do with Fitzwilliam Darcy, something that would put him initially at odds with feminist Lizzy? The answer came in a flash of ashamed desperation, but I had to go and shower before I could write anything down.

Darcy would, of course, be a devoted follower of the men's rights movement and their anti-feminist agenda, flirting with far-right politics. Admittedly that makes Darcy both pride and prejudice personified, but they did want overt themes, and that's about as overt as you can get.

It's already a step too far, but I'm planning on taking two steps backwards as soon as I can.

\*

*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of good opportunity, must be in want of a drink.*

Guess what? He loved it – but it didn't go far enough.

Even worse, I've inspired him to have a 'brilliant idea,' one which he took delight in expanding upon in excruciating detail. It turns out my characters were too nuanced for him, but in a moment of utter clarity, he realised exactly when it should be set and how to fix my failings.

It's to be set in the present day, with Darcy inspired by far-right conspiracy theories in general and a devotee of Nigel Farage in particular. Lizzy Bennet is a gender-critical feminist who's engaged online with campaigns against transgender rights. Her sister, Jane, is a more compassionate feminist who argues for equal rights for all. Darcy and Lizzy find common ground over the divisive tactics they jointly employ to further their causes.

I mean, I did say he specialised in horror movies.

The only positive thing I can say is that I've been paid. It feels like blood money, except I'm the killer.

After a couple of single malt whiskies, I've finally settled on how to respond. I can't ignore all his warped idea in one go, but I have to rein things back in. If he goes ahead with the current idea, there's absolutely no way I could be involved any further – even ignoring the unforgivable bastardisation of my beloved *Pride and Prejudice*, it goes against everything I believe in.

I'll start off with a pragmatic point. Making a movie based around modern-day culture wars is likely to alienate a large portion of his core audience, one way or another, especially those who'd normally be well-disposed towards a *P&P* adaptation. That's my way of saying that I won't turn characters I love into people I hate.

I can't just criticise. I need to propose something else that matches his themes but is so irredeemably naff that he'll think again. My least worst idea is to go back a few decades to the last time similar far-right sentiments came to the fore in the UK.

So we're now set in the 1930s, Mr Darcy is a supporter of Oswald Mosley, and Lizzy is an author of feminist novels who regularly corresponds with Virginia Woolf – which makes

her bearable again. One step at a time. At least we can still make it a costume drama, even if there will be too many black shirts in the wardrobe.

Look, I need the money, OK? Anyway, I'm banking on him rejecting it, so we can go back to the right period of history and start again.

\*

*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single writer in possession of good circumstances, must be in want of sabotage.*

Guess what? He loved it, but...

This time, the main feedback came from the financiers. They want a 'stronger hook' to justify their investment, something that would cement its mass-market appeal.

What?

Everyone's agreed that setting it in the 1930s with the feminist-fascist reinvention of the characters is a stroke of genius. They've put me on a retainer until the project is complete.

I'm working with lunatics.

I mean, that gives me the financial stability I need in the short term, they've given me another payment already, and supplied a draft contract. I even get a payoff if it's cancelled. It's more money than I've ever earned before, so I can't see any choice but to sign it.

I've ordered a couple of bottles of Laphroaig on Amazon to celebrate and give me the courage to continue. Can I really do this?

The lump sum on termination is playing on my mind. That alone would give me time to find something better without constantly worrying about money, but how can I expedite matters without making it obvious?

I've had another amazing idea. Maybe I am a genius, after all. I know exactly the mass-market cinematic hook to reel them in to their death.

Let's make it a musical. I'll dangle the temptation of *Moulin Rouge* under their nose and then deliver *Grease 2*. To keep things simple, a period jukebox musical would serve my purpose, but what songs can we re-use?

For a start, I'll get Darcy to sing *Tomorrow Belongs to Me* from *Cabaret*. That's appropriately unsubtle. If I can summon enough hubris, I could add new lyrics to Cole Porter's *Anything Goes* for Lizzy to sing. There's enough in there that works already:

*The world has gone mad today*

*And good's bad today*

*And black's white today*

*And day's night today*

How far can I push it? I have a feeling that everyone involved in this project is tone-deaf enough to forget what's a parody and what isn't. I know exactly the song to be played while Lizzy and Darcy lock eyes across the dance floor at Netherfield: *Springtime for Hitler* from *The Producers*. Perfect.

That's so terrible, the project is sure to fail.

\*

*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single scriptwriter in possession of good feedback, must be in want of the exit.*

And they loved it. Of course they did. Did I really forget how it went in *The Producers*?

Turns out Netflix are no longer involved, but the new startup patriotic streaming service, BritFirst, will be taking it. I don't know what to say.

They're even planning to use the same filming locations as the great BBC version, which makes me feel even dirtier. How did I get into this mess?

All I can do is deliver the worst, tackiest job I can manage: the *Mrs Brown's Boys* of period drama. I'm sure it will get cancelled before it's complete, and I can pick up my final payoff and walk away with a clean conscience.

Two things are now needed.

Firstly, a pseudonym. There's no way I'm going to put my real name to this travesty.

Secondly, a new title. I'm not going to sully Jane Austen's masterpiece by using hers, but I need something that these idiots will lap up. Luckily, I've recently rewatched *Blackadder the Third*, which has given me an idea that even they would have rejected as an episode name. What else could I use with Lizzy as a novelist and Darcy as a fascist?

I'm so glad it'll never see the light of day.

\*

*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single malt in possession of a good owner, must be in want of a glass.*

Coming soon to BritFirst: *Author and Authoritarian*, a musical tale of patriotic pride and prejudice, inspired by Jane Austen.

And they used my real name too. I'm so sorry.