

# Book Wars

TRUTHS UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED

## TWO TALES OF MODERN MANNERS

### ELIGIBLE

**Stylist contributor Laura Price backs *Eligible* by Curtis Sittenfeld (£14.99, Harper Collins), out now**

For the last few years – let's call them The Tinder Years – I've been longing to return to the Jane Austen era of good old-fashioned courting. A time when prospective suitors had to call and speak to your father before they could ask you out, instead of simply swiping right and maybe texting a winky face before going completely AWOL. Sadly – and I speak from experience – the age of romance is truly dead, and there are few books that so perfectly express the highs and lows of post-Noughties dating than the latest masterpiece by Curtis Sittenfeld, author of *American Wife*.

A modern adaptation of *Pride And Prejudice* based in Cincinnati, *Eligible* sticks to all the original characters but with a deliciously modern twist. Elizabeth (Liz) Bennet is a magazine journalist pushing 40 and still on the hunt for a husband, having spent half her life pursuing a man who can only be described as a complete douchebag. Jane has all but given up on love and is about to go down the route of artificial insemination, while middle sister Mary is perennially single, living at home with Lydia and Kitty, who are both addicted to CrossFit and showing no inclination to work. Mrs Bennet, naturally, is beside herself over the failure of all five daughters to find a spouse.

Enter Chip Bingley, wealthy young bachelor and former contestant on reality TV dating show *Eligible*, who arrives in Cincinnati looking for his match. Bingley's best friend is, of course, Fitzwilliam Darcy, as stubborn, rude but ultimately adorable as his original incarnation. Will the Bennet girls beat off various rivals to win their hearts? Well, not without a bit of drama, a few transgender issues and a reality TV show cameo.

*The Lubetkin Legacy* is another hilariously clever reflection on 21st century life – this time in London – but the characters just aren't quite as lovable as our classic heroines. Plus, as a 30-something singleton, I found *Eligible* so relevant and relatable. Whether or not you're an Austen fan, you'll adore this version: this is *Pride And Prejudice* 2.0 and I must confess, I liked it more than the original. There, I said it.

★★★★☆



### THE LUBETKIN LEGACY

**Stylist's events director Mariam Ahmed fights for *The Lubetkin Legacy* by Marina Lewycka (£14.99, Fig Tree), out 5 May**

To me, Austen pastiches are a no-no. How are you ever going to top the anticipation, the tease, the innuendo? I feel even more strongly when it comes to the Darcy-Elizabeth relationship; I'm just not sure it's a story that needs to be re-told. Saying that, there were some interesting elements in Curtis Sittenfeld's *Eligible*, a modern day adaptation of *Pride And Prejudice*, which showcase the timelessness of Austen's characters. (For example, Lydia and Kitty are now attention-grabbing, selfie-taking, fitness freaks who fall for socially unacceptable men.) And the book highlights the haphazard nature of family and solidarity in the face of adversity.

Marina Lewycka's *The Lubetkin Legacy* is also centred on family and community, following the lives of two very different council block tenants. Berthold is a middle-aged, out-of-work actor who, while recovering from depression, is living with his mother in her council flat. When she falls ill and dies, her last words to him are, "Don't let them get the flat." The book details the great lengths to which he goes to keep said flat, including adopting one of his mother's friends to live with him in her guise. He's pathetic and ill-mannered but lovable and Lewycka captures his social awkwardness perceptively and hilariously.

Meanwhile, across the hall Violet has just landed her first job and is learning the ropes in the world of banking where morals don't matter

and often you need to discount your conscience. Through her story I relived my first move away from home, my first job and the simultaneous feeling of loving and fearing my newfound independence.

Their stories are intertwined but also united by their portrayal of survival and self-discovery. And thanks to the diverse backgrounds of characters, you feel like you're learning something about other cultures without even trying – just as I did with Lewycka's bestseller, *A Short History Of Tractors In Ukrainian*. Her latest novel is at once a true reflection of coming of age and an authentic portrait of multicultural London.

★★★★☆

### The verdict: *The Lubetkin Legacy* just pips it

Curtis Sittenfeld's *Eligible*, a modern day retelling of *Pride And Prejudice*, is bound to be divisive, risking the wrath of both Austenites and Sittenfeld fans hoping for another *American Wife*. There will be lovers, and there will be haters. Lewycka's fifth novel (named after the modernist architect Berthold Lubetkin, who designed council housing across London in the Thirties) risks less, while still offering a lot. It's insightful, witty and engaging, painting a picture of modern Britain that will be at once recognisable and enlightening.