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## ‘Behind the Screen: Jane Austen Wrecked My Life’: Celebrating Austen’s 250th Birthday through Another Lens



The moderator and panelists discuss "Jane Austen Wrecked My Life." By [Leah E. Rodriguez](#)

In celebration of Jane Austen's 250th birthday this year, the West Newton Cinema hosted "Behind the Screen: Jane Austen Wrecked My Life," a film screening followed by a panel discussion, on Oct. 5. The event was part of a greater initiative to revitalize the theater and local community, serving as an open space to foster connection through a love of film.

Directed by Laura Piani, the French film "Jane Austen Wrecked My Life" follows Agathe (Camille Rutherford), who works at the famous Shakespeare and Company bookshop in Paris. The film is not an adaptation of Jane Austen's work, rather, Agathe maintains Austen's spirit through her love of all things romantic. Her dreams of becoming a successful writer and finding love are crushed by crippling writer's block and the fact that she is chronically single. With some meddling from her best friend, Felix (Pablo Pauly), Agathe earns a spot at the Jane Austen Residency, a writing retreat in England, where her life and writing change forever. In true Austenian fashion, Agathe finds herself in a romantic triangle between Felix, her silly and comforting best friend, and Oliver (Charlie Anson), the brooding yet fascinating professor she meets at the residency. Questions arise: Will Agathe succeed and become a successful writer? Perhaps more importantly, will she not only find love but also finally find herself?

These themes were explored in a post-screening discussion moderated by Mary Cotton, the owner of Newtonville Books. The panel included Sonia Hofkosh, Associate Professor and Chair of English at Tufts University, Deidre Lynch, Professor of English Literature at Harvard University, and Tara Menon, Assistant Professor of English at Harvard University.

Their conversation explored the influence of female writers and the different approaches Austen-inspired films have utilized to convey the universal messages found in her literature.

Lynch argued that rather than just relying on one Austen text, "Jane Austen Wrecked My Life" takes inspiration from both "Pride and Prejudice" and "Persuasion." Agathe directly compares herself to Anne Elliot of "Persuasion,"

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According to Menon, despite its use of such a ubiquitous trope, the film — and Austen herself — strays from traditional expectations of romance and a romantic comedy.

“Jane Austen is the first writer to make women seem as though they’re human beings, that they’re just normal and even capable of humor,” she said.

Menon also noted how the lack of a female rival distinguishes the film from Austen’s novels: “There is never at any moment the sense that any other woman is competing for the attention of either of these two.”

Hokfosh highlighted how Austen is woven into the very fabric of the film, not just in the dialogue, but through the use of silence to symbolize barriers in communication between Agathe and Oliver.

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“There were a lot of moments — minutes — where there was no talking,” Hokfosh said. “I was struck by the pace of it. It was quite generously slow.”

During the discussion, Menon asked her fellow panelists about their thoughts on how the film's first frame evokes Charlotte Brontë’s “Jane Eyre.” Hokfosh argued that this deliberate choice emphasizes the shared connection both Austen and Brontë have, who “have more in common” than expected. The interweaving of the two — despite Brontë’s distaste for Austen — highlights the long-running societal habit to group iconic female writers together. While they both wrote about romance, however, their styles and other thematic choices were quite distinct from each other.

shared characteristic among everyone in attendance was a deep love for Austen. It was clear that Austen no longer exists in the collective mind simply as an influential female author, but as a cornerstone of romantic literature and culture.

Beyond important conversations about the film's portrayal of love and romance, Lynch also acknowledged that where the film was lacking was in its depiction of other important themes in Austen's works: "She teaches us a lot about not just love, but also about ethics and independence [and] about how people navigate worlds that are defined by extremes of inequality — including inequality between men and women."

Through this screening, panelists and audience members alike celebrated Jane Austen and her legacy beyond that of her most famous work, "Pride and Prejudice."

"I do worry that people only adapt 'Pride and Prejudice' over and over again, and that 'Pride and Prejudice' — which is in some ways her most uncharacteristic novel — somehow seems to stand in people's minds for all of her fiction," Lynch said.

The West Newton Cinema is not only revitalizing a community of fans through these signature events, but reshaping the way visitors fundamentally think about movies.

Lynne Pepall, a Board Member of the Weston Newton Cinema Foundation, emphasized that the purpose of the Behind the Scenes events is to encourage attendees to take a moment to be thoughtful in their lives.

"I believe that the survival of movies is that we have a shared experience," she said. "And part of the experience is to discuss the movies afterwards."

—Staff writer Emma D. D. Pham-Tran can be found at [emma.phamtran@thecrimson.com](mailto:emma.phamtran@thecrimson.com).

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