



## Emma & Knightley: Perfect Happiness in Highbury: A Sequel to Jane Austen's Emma

By Rachel Billington

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"... the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union."

Thus the last line of Jane Austen's Emma. A year later, Emma and Knightley are still living at Hartfield, surrounded by the Westons, the Eltons and the Bateses. But as events unfold, the couple must deal with the return of Frank Churchill, now widowed, and Knightley's apparently endless patience is tried by events in his brother's family, as well as his beloved Emma's whims and fancies.

But the irrepressible Emma is restless ...

Emma wants Knightley to stop treating her like a child. Knightley meanwhile wants his young bride to love him as a husband, not as the man she's always looked up to. With tragedy in the offing, and events unfolding that include beloved characters from Emma, the couple must find their way to each other, and to perfect happiness.

With a wonderful grasp of the manners and style of the day, this warm and witty exploration of a marriage between a sheltered (not to say spoiled) young lady and the man she looked upon as an older brother fulfills the romantic longings of Jane Austen lovers everywhere.

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Rachel Billington has published thirteen novels, including *A Woman's Age*, *Loving Attitudes*, *Bodily Harm* and, most recently, *Magic and Fate*. She has also published two children's novels and three religious books for younger children, as well as *The Great Umbilical*, a work of nonfiction about mothers and daughters. Her plays have been performed on radio and television and her varied work as a reviewer and journalist included a regular weekly column, published as "The Family Year."

She is married with four children.

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Excerpt from Chapter 1

EMMA KNIGHTLEY, HANDSOME, CLEVER and rich, with a husband whose affection for her was only equalled by her affection for him, had passed upward of a year of marriage in what may be described as perfect happiness; certainly this is how she described it to herself as she sat at her writing desk from which she had an excellent view of her father, Mr Woodhouse, taking a turn round the shrubbery on the arm of her beloved Mr Knightley.

Emma smiled as she watched them, smiled and repressed a sigh as she saw the tender way in which Mr Knightley – she would never bring herself to call him George – put his upright, manly self between the cool autumnal breeze and the frail figure of her father. Since she, herself, usually performed this daily office for her father – Mr Knightley often being occupied in the mornings when her father felt the air most conducive to good health – seldom did she have the opportunity of seeing her parent as he appeared at a distance to the objective eye.

His walking was tentative, it could not be denied, but then he had never been quick, or never since she could remember him. It was possible – Emma considered the idea from the heights of her still new stature as a wife – that his sense of himself as an invalid had stemmed from the early death of Mrs Woodhouse, causing him to distrust health. If that were the cause – and, by his affectionate accounts of his wife, she had possessed all the vivacity, intellectual vigour and good health that any woman could wish for – then it was understandable that her adoring husband's temperament should receive a severe shock at her unexpected death; that he would never be the same, but always fearful, not just for himself, but for his daughters (Emma had an elder sister, Isabella), their husbands, Isabella's five children (soon to be six), his friends, acquaintances and, in short, the whole world, small as it was, that he inhabited.

For Mr Woodhouse, a draught from a not properly closed window was as dangerous as a wind chased from Petersburg over the snowy wastes of Siberia; a sneeze from relation or friend caused as much consternation as the plague spots in a Turkoman port; a boot only slightly damp from a walk across mown grass excited his terror to such an extent that the wearer – usually Emma, who was his nearest and dearest, although not of an especially active, energetic disposition – must submit to a hot mustard bath and constant enquiries as to her temperature.

All this Emma had known since she was a child and such was her love for her father, so fond was she of him, that she had thought of it as illustrating the kindness of his heart rather than as any weakness of character. But that had been before her marriage.

Making no more pretence to write her letter – it was to be a note to mark the birthday of her eldest nephew, Henry, who was with his family, in London – she once again contemplated the two figures so closely adjoined in the pathway. They had now turned and were directly facing her, although they were seen some way off and the sunlight in their faces would have precluded them from any view of Emma.

Ah, indeed! thought Emma, it is the contrast that makes me uneasy. But this was too dangerous a way of thinking and must be quelled instantly. Yet, as is often the case, this little acknowledgement of unease led on to a much graver one for, as she watched her father with the same fond eyes that had put him first all her life; that had, indeed, insisted that she could never leave his side and thus brought her husband from his home at Donwell Abbey into her home of Hartfield, she found herself wondering how long he, Mr Woodhouse, an avowed invalid, would live.

It was a terrible thought for a daughter to have about her father, so terrible, so utterly filled with vice that she disowned it at once, clanged shut the door into her heart that had revealed such grimacing horror, and, in a moment, was smiling once more into the sunny garden and thinking, with all contentment, how wonderful it was that her strong Mr Knightley, so much outdoors with his farm business, such a powerful walker that it needed all her wiles to persuade him into using the carriage, should yet so comfortably subdue his step to fit her father's. He did it, she knew, not only out of his love for her or even out of his respect for his father-in-law but because he truly loved her father. He had told her so; and Mr Knightley never lied.

Emma dropped her eyes to her paper, now adorned with blobs of ink resembling some fantastic beast. Another thought, as misshapen as the ink, appeared irrepressible in her mind. Why was it that the more patient, kind, understanding, candid, Mr Knightley showed himself to her father, the more uneasy, restless and unsympathetic she herself became? Why, in the face of such goodness, was she tempted to become bad? Scrumpling the paper with a frown, Emma stood up briskly; she would go and meet the two people she loved most in the world and join their pleasure in each other's company with her own delight in theirs. She was on the point of summoning her maid to bring shawl and hat when the girl herself appeared, holding a letter which had that moment been brought to the door.

Seeing at once it was from the very household, that of her sister, to whom she should have been writing, Emma sat back down on her seat again and broke the seal to the envelope. First, however, she noted with satisfaction that Mr Knightley and her father had turned their backs to her and were started on their second turn round the shrubbery. News from his eldest daughter, whether good, bad or of no real account, was equally capable of arousing Mr Woodhouse's fears – as if change itself was threat – so Emma was in the habit of first apprising herself of such information as Henry's little successes at school or baby Emma's new tooth; and then gradually passing it on to her father.

For her, to the contrary, news from outside the house of Hartfield where her days passed so quietly, was always exciting and as eagerly read as a romance. Emma, whose fertile imagination had become very active, as if to compensate for an uneventful life, seldom admitted herself disappointed with even the dulllest material. On this occasion, however, she had no need to use any exceptional powers, and, as she read, her mobile face expressed consternation, shock and something most like disbelief. Her youthfully clear skin changed from pink to pale to pink and finally – as tears started in her eyes – to a pallor from which all colour had drained. Indeed, it almost looked as if she must faint, so shocking to her were the contents of the letter.

But Emma was no weakling and soon she had wiped her eye with her little embroidered kerchief and, with a more resolute expression, picked up the letter once more.

## **Users Review**

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