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Jane Austen Wrecked My Life

Abstract

This is a film review of *Jane Austen Wrecked My Life* (2024), directed by Laura Piani.

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Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator, and story editor with more than thirty years' experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



**Jane Austen Wrecked My Life (2024), dir. Laura Piani
Toronto International Film Festival World Premiere**

Jane Austen Wrecked My Life is shaped in many ways not only by its titular author, but also by classics of the rom-com genre that it belongs to. A debut feature from Paris-based director Laura Piani, it nonetheless has its own charm and visual style, taking shape in a slow, comedic, self-conscious tone that plays like a cross between Mia Hansen-Løve and Wes Anderson.

Based on the book by Beth Patillo, the film follows a French writer working in Paris' famous Shakespearean & Co. bookstore, that British landmark in a French city that has long held a mystique for other writers and artists and even for filmmakers. Richard Linklater's *Before Sunset*, the middle film of the *Before* trilogy, opens with a scene in which the character of Jesse is talking about his latest book in Shakespeare & Co. His novel is a thinly veiled story about his own encounter with a French woman named Celine while traveling in Europe (seen in the trilogy's first film, *Before Sunrise*). The opening credits have barely faded when Celine herself is revealed to be in the bookstore, hovering in the background. Jesse spots her, and so the story continues. *Jane Austen Wrecked My Life* eventually finds its way back to Shakespeare & Co. where a similar scene is reminiscent of yet another rom-com that starts and ends in a bookstore—*Notting Hill*.

Agathe (Camille Rutherford) is a single thirty-something writer who knows everything there is to know about Jane Austen, but whose personal relationships lack the lustre of those found in the novels of the great British writer. Agathe's co-worker, Felix, is also her best friend, with whom she sometimes has sex. Felix is a frequent visitor to the house she shares with her sister and her sister's rotating partners, and her sister's son. The son adores Agathe and their relationship is more nurturing than the one he has with his mother.

As the relationship between Felix and Agatha starts to heat up a little, Felix longs to startle Agathe out of her rut, in which she seems to have settled for average boredom and little stimulation beyond books. (Even Agathe refers to herself as a loser and terminal drifter.) Without her knowing, he sends her novel-in-progress off to a Jane Austen residency program and as we can predict, Agathe is soon reluctantly on a ferry headed for England, with little more than a computer and an unexpectedly intense farewell kiss from Felix to accompany her.

Almost immediately, she meets Oliver (Charlie Anson), an English aristocrat with plummy ancestral lines to Austen herself. His arrogance and indifference to her are immediately off-putting and in typical genre fashion, they immediately hate each other. When his car breaks down (another trope: think, *It Happened One Night*), they are forced to confront the stranger they are stuck with, against their own wills, and one or two sparks start to fly. Once they have arrived at the retreat, however, Agathe immediately forgets him, still wondering if things with Felix are on their way to the next level.

Now settled in a beautiful English estate, Agathe is joined by other writers who are lost in their own preoccupations. Adrift and unable to focus, she finds herself falling into the traps of intellectual exchange, while also revealing to us for the first time the depth of her own literary knowledge and expertise. Her confidence grows, despite the fact that everyone seems to disagree

with her philosophies. Oliver's father, who has dementia, sees her gifts, even if he is also prone to roaming naked in gardens, reciting poetry. When Agathe finds him and steers him gently toward Oliver for care, Oliver becomes smitten.

The unfolding events are like any in an Austen novel—but Piani's characters live in their own world. The moments of hiding behind bushes and being found where one shouldn't be found feels more Shakespearean than Austen, but the film engages many literary references. The retreat culminates in a regency-themed ball at which Agathe dances with Oliver in choreography reminiscent of *Bridgerton, Season 2*. When Felix makes a surprise appearance, we are headed for a romantic showdown.

The final scene of the film finds Agathe back in the Paris bookstore, hosting a reading with American poet and activist Jack Hirschman, playing himself. As he reads aloud his poem, "Path," Agathe sees Oliver in the audience and we know where we are headed. The beautiful images of the Hirschman poem, read with the full wisdom and warmth of his older years, usher us into Agathe's future. It turns out that Jane Austen did not wreck Agathe's life after all; she has instead inspired Agathe with the wit and wisdom she needs to fully imagine her own.