

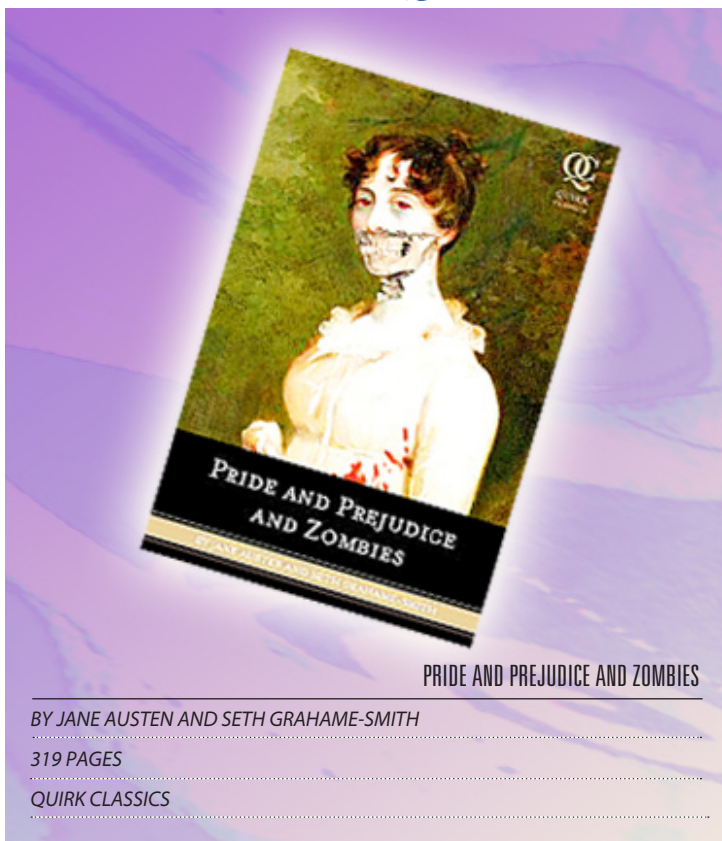
[SOFTCOVER: US]

Zombies visit Jane Austen

Seth Grahame-Smith's book sees the living dead invade the plot of 'Pride and Prejudice'

BY COLETTE BANCROFT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, ST PETERSBURG

Publication Notes



BY JANE AUSTEN AND SETH GRAHAME-SMITH
319 PAGES
QUIRK CLASSICS

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: If you thought that might be the punch line for a joke about what could get guys to read chick lit, you're half right. It's also a new well, kind of novel, in bookstores today, by "Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith."

Austen was unavailable for an interview, but Grahame-Smith, 33, is promoting the collaboration. A comedy writer with five books to his name, he's writer/ executive producer of a pilot filming for MTV, *Hard Times*.

Grahame-Smith retained Austen's plot and characters but added a 55-year zombie infestation of the English countryside. The husband-hunting Bennet sisters still sally out to tea parties and balls, but they go armed with muskets, swords and their training as ninja zombie killers.

It's all rendered in Regency-style prose, complete with the wit that's an Austen hallmark. When one of Elizabeth Bennet's friends announces her marriage to an unsuitable suitor, she confides that she has been bitten by a zombie: "I don't have long, Elizabeth. All I ask is that my final months be happy ones, and that I be permitted a husband who will see to my proper Christian beheading and burial."

Grahame-Smith chatted by phone from Los Angeles.

Collette Bancroft: What's the origin of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*?

Seth Grahame-Smith: My editor, Jason Rekulak, and I had done five books together. He always had this obsession. He wanted to add some ridiculous subplot to a classic book.

One day he called me and said, "All I have is this title, but I can't get it out of my head: *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*."

I said, "I think that's the most brilliant thing I've ever heard."

CB: People thought this might be a short, one-joke item. Why rewrite the entire novel?

SGS: Jane Austen did all the hard work. She gave her characters such life and such unpredictable arcs, she let the plot unfold so brilliantly. All I had to do was paint over it.

Take Elizabeth. Instead of the sharp-witted, independent young woman, she's a sharp-daggered, independent young woman. She just happens to be a talented slayer of the undead.

CB: Did your publisher think it was a brilliant idea?

SGS: We had to work hard to sell it as a concept. Finally they said, "Okay, but you'll have to do it quickly, and we're not going to spend a lot of money on it."

Then some industrious blogger found it, and suddenly it propagated throughout the blogosphere.

CB: Despite its crazy concept, you took the writing of the book very seriously. Why?

SGS: I wanted people who would never read Austen to pick this up. I also didn't want to write a book that wouldn't be palatable to her fans. I was afraid it might offend the Janeites. I call it the "How dare you, Sir? syndrome." But so many Janeites have loved it. They have a great sense of humor.

CB: Do you think we'll see *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: The Film*?

SGS: Hey, it's no crazier than half the movies that get made.

Bill Maher isgoingstraighttohell



The problem with us rational people is that we tend not to gather in groups, like religious people.

— Bill Maher, comic and producer



US comic Bill Maher, who says his new film proves that religion is just ridiculous, is atheism's funniest advocate

BY JOHN PATTERSON
THE GUARDIAN, HOLLYWOOD

his office at CBS-TV studios in Hollywood, Bill Maher is busy being Bill Maher. "You'll never get rid of Christianity in this country because it will reinvent itself, as it always has. Every generation does a Superman movie, every generation does Hamlet, and they do it in a new and different way. Because that's what a myth is: a living, breathing, mutating thing. So that central bit of, 'There was a God, he had a son and he died for your sins?' I mean that's just an entitlement program that no one wants to give up! Why would you? 'Oh, he died for my sins? That's fantastic — why, of course I love him! So I can keep sinning now, because he died for me!'"

Somewhere along the way, this half-Catholic, half-Jewish, wholly non-observant stand-up comedian has turned into one of the most visible, vocal atheists in America. He is a ruder, less intellectual, far more foul-mouthed and much funnier teammate of Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins. This week sees the release of Maher's own atheist manifesto, the effervescent and provocative documentary feature film *Religulous*.

Directed by Larry Charles, the former *Seinfeld* writer who brought us Borat's cinematic provocations, *Religulous* is atheism and rationalism washed down with a spoonful of acidic comedy. Maher has traveled the US and the Middle East confronting the craziest and sanest devout figures he can find, inserting himself into situations where religion and ridiculousness naturally and unabashedly band together.

Here he is at the Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Florida, debating with the handsome actor who plays Jesus in the theme park's re-enactments of the Passion, all beneath the local airport's noisily anachronistic flight path. Or in a converted lorry functioning as a church at a southern truck stop, berating increasingly angry blue-collar worshippers for their credulity.

Here he is meeting Pastor John Westcott, an "ex-gay" preacher who insists that, "nobody's born gay." Elsewhere a cast of humourless halfwits, minatory prophets, ex-Jews-for-Jesus, homophobic closet queens, and, of course, doubters, are intercut with scenes from every overblown religious epic you have ever seen.

In Europe, one suspects, all this is less controversial than in the US, where just getting to see the movie could be difficult. "It simply wasn't available in many areas," says Maher. "I've likened it to getting an abortion. People complain all the time that if you want to get an abortion in America, often you have to drive 300 miles [483km] — same with *Religulous*."

And yet a recent census found that the fastest-growing "religious minority" is non-believers. Not to mention that Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris have all topped the bestseller lists. "Yes. 1990: 7 percent of Americans had no religious affiliation; and then the most recent census reported a doubling of that number. But does it level off — or does it grow? And three writers — yes, the more voices we have, the better. But we're looking for a tipping point and America's still very far away from that. Before that happens, or doesn't, rationalism needs to become something 'cool.' We need to tell people who believe in mythical space gods, 'Dude, you are so old-school 20th century!'"

THE PATH TO REDEMPTION

Maher made the biggest splash of his career early in the 21st century, when he was fired by ABC-TV from his round-table show, *Politically Incorrect With Bill Maher*, for saying of the Sept. 11 hijackers, "We have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles [3,218km] away. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building? Say what you like about it, it's not cowardly." As he often asks, "Why was I the only person to lose his job after Sept. 11?" Plenty sympathized with Maher, though,

including the Home Box Office channel, which offered him a weekly show featuring guests of his own choosing. *Real Time With Bill Maher* has since become one of the essential stops for politicians making a name or running for national office, and its eclectic roster of guests offers a lively spectrum of political opinions that puts the cable-news gabfests to shame.

It has provided YouTube with endless instances of toothsome TV: regular guest Christopher Hitchens giving a hostile audience his rigid middle digit; clueless rightwingers subjected to deafening boos from Maher and fellow guests; or Maher himself wading furiously into the audience to eject an invading horde of Sept. 11 conspiracy-theorists. His panelists have included comics such as Roseanne Barr, Robin Williams and Sarah Silverman, novelists (Salman Rushdie), anti-globalization activists (Naomi Klein), political gadflies (Arianna Huffington), rappers (Mos Def, Will.I Am), and actors from Kevin Costner (dim) to Ben Affleck (sharp as a tack). The combinations can light a fire or fizzle like a damp squib — either way the show is unmissable.

Maher calls himself, broadly, a "libertarian" but veers mainly left, despite being pro-death penalty, staunch for Israel, and, by his own admission, pretty weird about what he eats. He's also an unabashed pothead, a single bachelor with a wryly self-confessed weakness for strippers and models. A lack of ties to mainstream ideologies nonetheless enables him to call for a plague on both their houses with no sense that he is angling for that chimera of news coverage, "objectivity."

Religulous offers no doubt about his stance on religion, though, and in person he's fiercely articulate and well-versed in rationalist arguments. Fifty-three years old, he was raised in suburban New Jersey by a "proud, bleeding-heart, Irish-American Kennedy-era liberal father," and a mother he

didn't learn was Jewish until he was 13. His father stopped the family attending Mass in protest against Catholic doctrine on birth control. Religion deserted Bill Maher long ago.

I put it to Maher that none of the religious right's big guns are in the movie. "I've been talking about this on TV for so long that I come pre-advertised. So we didn't get anywhere near Pat Robertson or the Pope. Those guys are so well-rehearsed in their bullshit that you get a more honest picture if you just talk to the rank-and-file. The Jesus guy at the Holy Land Experience was a much more interesting character than Pat Robertson would be."

BEYOND SALVATION

Did he get a sense that his subjects wished to cast him in the Lake of Fire? "They'd prefer to save me, pray for me. It would have been preferable to have their hostility, because I found their reaction very condescending, like I was a backward child. In their mind if you don't see Jesus Christ as your savior, then you are profoundly unenlightened. So you are, in a way, mirror-images of each other, because I see them as unenlightened, as being in thrall to a bronze-age myth."

The two perspectives seem irreconcilable. "The problem with us rational people is that we tend not to gather in groups, like religious people. Religious people gather in groups because when you're being told something really fantastical like, 'God had a son, who was really him, and he sent him on a suicide mission, and he survived, and you're eating his flesh when you're eating this bread that was obviously bought at a store' ... If you're gonna swallow all that you need someone standing next to you swallowing it too. If religion does anything it preys on the sheeplike qualities of human beings. And atheists and agnostics aren't joiners, because we celebrate our individualism and our ability to freely think on our own."

[HARDCOVER: UK]

Gods and monsters, both real and unreal

Sex, drugs, art and mysticism collide in Geoff Dyer's entertaining novel that charts the journalist's journey from debauchery to partial enlightenment

BY ALICE O'KEEFFE
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

The premise of this book could be the definition of what I generally look to avoid in a novel: a semi-autobiographical travelogue in which the protagonist, a British journalist approaching middle age, lives the high life at the Venice Biennale and then goes off to "find himself" in India. It seemed horribly certain to involve smugness and midlife crisis-related oversharing. Neither did the title, with its naff pun, bode well. Remarkably, from this material Geoff Dyer has fashioned a novel that is both funny and insightful.

Dyer, who is 50, has tackled a diverse range of subjects in his 10 previous books, ranging from the missing of the Somme to the pleasures of drug-taking, but the central preoccupation of his work is usually himself. *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi* is no exception. The novel is divided into two sections, the first telling

the story of a Dyer alter-ego, Jeff Atman, a recently divorced hack sent to Venice to cover the Biennale for *Kulchur* magazine. Obviously, the art shows are merely the fringe entertainment on this trip; a pleasant means of passing the time while recovering from the previous night's bellini-induced hangover. Jeff is further distracted from his ostensible purpose by the beautiful Laura, an American gallerist.

Much to his amazement, she is undeterred by his age and skinniness, and together they embark on a three-day sex and booze and drug-fuelled bender. At a party aboard a millionaire's yacht, blasted on coke and with this gorgeous creature on his arm, Jeff experiences a joyous epiphany: "The last six or however many hours it was were like a concentrated version of everything he had ever wanted from his life."

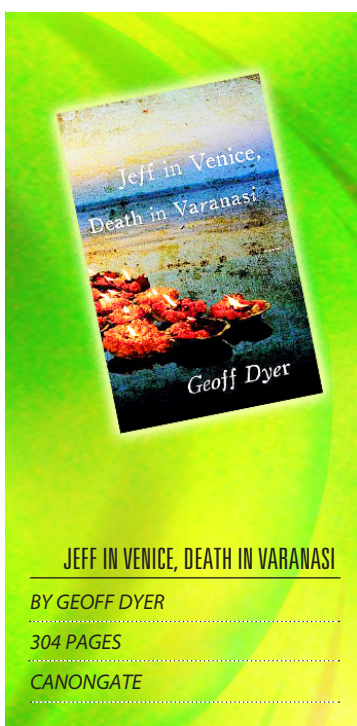
That feeling is an illusion, both real and unreal, like much

of the art on show and like Venice itself. As befits a novel about two watery cities, this book is filled with shimmering apparitions that never quite resolve themselves. The morning after the party, Jeff and Laura go and sit in a light installation by James Turrell: "It was an illusion, but because it was an illusion this did not mean it was less real than anything else, than things which were not illusory."

Jeff's story, which could have been mundane, is rescued by this mystical quality and by Dyer's very funny — and accurate — portrait of the contemporary art world in all its ridiculousness. After several nights on the lash, a colleague of Jeff's proposes a toast to the only artist worth remembering from the Biennale: Bellini. This is greeted by a great — and by no means entirely ironic — cheer.

While the art world is neatly skewered, however, it is not

Publication Notes



JEFF IN VENICE, DEATH IN VARANASI
BY GEOFF DYER
304 PAGES
CANONGATE

dismissed. Jeff's responses to the work he sees are acute and deeply felt. Dyer, or, rather, Jeff (Dyer makes a point of distancing himself from Jeff's critical opinions in an end note), manages to find meaning in contemporary art without falling into the emperor's new clothes trap: "The work may have been puerile, but the hunger to succeed of which it was the product and symbol was ravenous. In different historical circumstances, any number of these artists could have seized control of the Reichstag or ruled Cambodia with unprecedented ruthlessness."

Unfortunately, Dyer's control evaporates as soon as Laura's kit comes off. In order to enjoy a sex scene, one needs to feel at some level attracted to the characters involved, and as much as Jeff is funny and likable, he was not someone I wanted to picture at it in quite the forensic level of detail provided.

The second section, *Death in Varanasi*, is a rippled and distorted reflection of the first. Again, a writer gets sent off on an assignment, this time to do a travel piece on the sacred Indian city where the dead are cremated by the Ganges. This protagonist is very similar to Jeff, but now he narrates in the first person. We keep expecting the two stories to converge — Laura talks in the first section about traveling to Varanasi — but although they come within touching distance of one another, they remain discrete.

Certain details reappear, like objects floating to the surface of a river: a dog chewing its tail, a bunch of bananas. In Venice, Jeff dreams he is a corpse being chewed on by a dog; we stumble upon this corpse again in Varanasi. Laura's reflection is Laline, a beautiful fellow traveler who bestows her love not on the narrator but on his charismatic

friend, Darrell.

In Varanasi, the material pleasures that came so easily in Venice remain out of reach and lose their significance. While Jeff is driven by his desires, tormented by the itch of his ambition, Jeff/Geoff gradually sloughs off such concerns and delivers himself to the spirit of his own imaginary god, Ganoona, "all that which is not anything else. But it's also that which is everything else."

Both experiences are responses to the same existential problem: a life that has been built upon foundations as faulty as Venice's, an unfulfilling job, a failed relationship. The coke, the sex, the bellinis deliver little more than a thudding hangover, while Ganoona leads towards something akin to madness. There are no glib self-help solutions here, but there is an amusing and intelligent exploration of some of life's big questions.