

Jane Austen Fans Deserve Better Than 'Sanditon'

"Sanditon" will debut on American television on Sunday, January 12 on PBS' "Masterpiece," though the series already aired on British television last fall. Fans of Jane Austen have been awaiting Sanditon with bated breath.

Austen's other novels have been adapted for television or film multiple times over the years. Aside from a modernized web miniseries, "Sanditon" has never been adapted because Austen only wrote 12 chapters of the book before she fell too ill to continue, eventually dying before completing the novel.

The promos for Sanditon make a big fuss of the fact that this is supposedly Austen's "unfinished novel." Having read the extant 12 chapters, I think it would be more accurate to characterize "Sanditon" as Austen's "not even started novel."

The text reads more like a list of characters. There's the hallmark of Austen's novel: a plucky but penniless heroine, this time by the name of Charlotte Heywood. Through a chance encounter with the entrepreneur Tom Parker and his wife, she ends up leaving her family's village to stay in the sleepy seaside resort town of Sanditon, which Tom is working hard to turn into a fashionable vacation spot.

Charlotte quickly meets another mainstay of Austen's novels: the grand old lady who uses her wealth to domineer others, particularly the poor relations who hope to be included in her will. In this iteration, her name is Lady Denham.

On one of the final pages, Charlotte meets Sidney Parker, Tom's unmarried brother. Austen likely intended him to be the book's romantic hero. But he doesn't get a single word of dialogue.

And that's about it. There is next-to-no indication of where Austen wanted to go with the plot. Thus, screenwriter Andrew Davies – who has written screenplays for most of Jane Austen's novels, as well as plenty of other classic works of fiction – had free reign.

He chose to take the plot in some very strange directions. Whatever else you could say about the "Sanditon" series, it's fair to assert that this was not the way Austen would have written the novel if she had lived a bit longer.

Austen set her works in her own day, a historical period which we now call "the Regency" (1811 to 1820.) In recent decades, "Regency romances" – which are basically romance novels set in the Regency period – have become something of a genre in their own right. They are hugely popular, and hundreds of titles have been published.

In writing the screenplay of "Sanditon," Davies seems to have been more influenced by Regency romances than by Austen's own works. The series contains a rather unusual sex scene that raised eyebrows in the U.K. when it aired. Austen would never have written anything remotely like that. Without giving away any spoilers, I can say the series contains quite a few events and situations that are very "un-Austenlike." In fact, the 2016 movie "Pride and Prejudice and Zombies" is probably more authentic to Jane Austen's works.

Even if you decide to accept "Sanditon" the series in its own right, and overlook that it is supposed to be Jane Austen, there still isn't much entertainment value. The plot is extremely uneven. Characters utter bizarre, woke dialogue like, "He alone has had the power to determine your self-worth and he has abused that power." The actors who portray Charlotte and Sidney lack any chemistry.

If you're still curious about "Sanditon," I recommend you only watch the first episode. You will meet all the characters

Austen actually intended to include in her novel and you can admire the lovely costumes. After that, it's fine to stop watching. You won't miss much.

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[Image Credit: YouTube-Masterpiece PBS, "[Sanditon Preview](#)"]