Of all Jane Austen's heroines, Emma Woodhouse is the most flawed, the most infuriating, and, in the end, the most endearing. Pride and Prejudices Lizzie Bennet has more wit and sparkle; Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey more imagination; and Sense and Sensibility's Elinor Dashwood certainly more sense--but Emma is lovable precisely because she is so imperfect. Austen only completed six novels in her lifetime, of which five feature young women whose chances for making a good marriage depend greatly on financial issues, and whose prospects if they fail are rather grim. Emma is the exception: Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her. One may be tempted to wonder what Austen could possibly find to say about so fortunate a character. The answer is, quite a lot. For Emma, raised to think well of herself, has such a high opinion of her own worth that it blinds her to the opinions of others. The story revolves around a comedy of errors: Emma befriends Harriet Smith, a young woman of unknown parentage, and attempts to remake her in her own image. Ignoring the gaping difference in their respective fortunes and stations in life, Emma convinces herself and her friend that Harriet should look as high as Emma herself might for a husband--and she zeroes in on an ambitious vicar as the perfect match. At the same time, she reads too much into a flirtation with Frank Churchill, the newly arrived son of family friends, and thoughtlessly starts a rumor about poor but beautiful Jane Fairfax, the beloved niece of two genteelly impoverished elderly ladies in the village. As Emma's fantastically misguided schemes threaten to surge out of control, the voice of reason is provided by Mr. Knightly, the Woodhouses longtime friend and neighbor. Though Austen herself described Emma as a heroine whom no one but myself will much like, she endowed her creation with enough charm to see her through her most egregious behavior, and the saving grace of being able to learn from her mistakes. By the end of the novel Harriet, Frank, and Jane are all properly accounted for, Emma is wiser (though certainly not sadder), and the reader has had the satisfaction of enjoying Jane Austen at the height of her powers. --Alix Wilber
"Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition" is a suitable heroine for Jane Austen's lightest, frothiest novel. While "Emma" is not nearly as dramatic as Austen's other works, it is an enchanting little comedy of manners in which a young woman with the best intentions meddles in others' love lives... with only the faintest idea of how people (including herself) actually feel.

After matchmaking her governess Miss Taylor, Emma Woodhouse considers herself a natural at bringing people together. She soon becomes best buddies with Harriet, a sweet (if not very bright) young woman who is the "natural daughter of somebody." Emma becomes determined to pair Harriet with someone deserving of her (even derailing a gentleman-farmer's proposal), such as the smarmy, charming Mr. Elton. When Emma's latest attempt falls apart, she finds that getting someone OUT of love is a lot harder than getting them INTO it.

At around the same time, two people that Emma has heard about her entire life have arrived -- the charming Frank Churchill, and the reserved, remote Miss Jane Fairfax (along with rumors of a married man's interest in her). Emma begins a flirtatious friendship with Frank, but for some reason is unable to get close to Miss Fairfax. As she navigates the secrets and rumors of other people's romantic lives, she begins to realize who she has been in love with all along.

Out of all Jane Austen's books, "Emma" is the frothiest and lightest -- there aren't any major scandals, lives ruined, reputations destroyed, financial crises or sinister schemes. There's just a little intertwined circle of people living in a country village, and how one young woman tries to rearrange them in the manner that she genuinely thinks is best. Of course, in true comedy style everything goes completely wrong.

And despite the formal stuffiness of the time, Austen wrote the book in a languidly sunny style, threading it with a complex web of cleverly orchestrated rumors and romantic tangles. There's some moments of seriousness (such as Emma's rudeness to kind, silly Miss Bates), but it's also laced with some entertaining dialogue ("Silly things do cease to be silly if they are done by sensible people in an impudent way") and barbed humor (the ridiculous and obnoxious Mrs. Elton).

Modern readers tend to be unfairly squicked by the idea of Emma falling for a guy who's known her literally all her life, but Austen makes the subtle relationship between Knightley and Emma one of affectionate bickering and beautiful romantic moments ("If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more. But you know what I am. You hear nothing but truth from me").

Emma is a character who is likable despite her flaws -- she's young, bright, well-meaning and assured of her own knowledge of the human heart, but also naive and sometimes snobbish. She flits around like a clumsy
butterfly, but is endearing even when she screws up. Mr. Knightley is her ideal counterpoint, being enjoyably blunt and sharp-witted at all times. And there's a fairly colorful supporting cast -- Emma's neurotic but sweet dad, her kindly ex-governess, the charming Frank, the fluttery Miss Bates, and even the smarmy Mr. Elton and his bulldozing wife.

"Emma" is the most lightweight and openly comedic of all Jane Austen's novels, with a likable (if clueless) heroine and a multilayered plot full of half-hidden feelings. A lesser delight.

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