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Death Comes to Pemberley
P.D. James, 2011
Knopf Doubleday
304 pp.

Summary
A rare meeting of literary genius: P. D. James, long among the most admired mystery writers of our time, draws the characters of Jane Austen’s beloved novel *Pride and Prejudice* into a tale of murder and emotional mayhem.

It is 1803, six years since Elizabeth and Darcy embarked on their life together at Pemberley, Darcy’s magnificent estate. Their peaceful, orderly world seems almost unassailable. Elizabeth has found her footing as the chatelaine of the great house. They have two fine sons, Fitzwilliam and Charles. Elizabeth’s sister Jane and her husband, Bingley, live nearby; her father visits often; there is optimistic talk about the prospects of marriage for Darcy’s sister Georgiana. And preparations are under way for their much-anticipated annual autumn ball.

Then, on the eve of the ball, the patrician idyll is shattered. A coach careens up the drive carrying Lydia, Elizabeth’s disgraced sister, who with her husband, the very dubious Wickham, has been banned from Pemberley. She stumbles out of the carriage, hysterical, shrieking that Wickham has been murdered. With shocking suddenness, Pemberley is plunged into a frightening mystery.

Inspired by a lifelong passion for Austen, P. D. James masterfully re-creates the world of *Pride and Prejudice*, electrifying it with the excitement and suspense of a brilliantly crafted crime story, as only she can write it. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio
• Birth—August 3, 1920
• Where—Oxford, England, UK
• Education—left school at 16
• Awards—member, International Crime Writing Hall of Fame (*see below for awards*)
• Currently—lives in both Oxford and London, England

Phyllis Dorothy James, Baroness James of Holland Park, commonly known as P. D. James, is an English crime writer and Conservative life peer in the House of Lords, most famous for a
James was born in Oxford, the daughter of Sidney James, a tax inspector, and educated at the British School in Ludlow and Cambridge High School for Girls.

James had to leave school at age sixteen to work: her family did not have much money and her father did not believe in higher education for girls. She worked in a tax office for three years, and later found a job as an assistant stage manager for a theater group. In 1941, she married Ernest Connor Bantry White, an army doctor, and had two daughters, Claire and Jane.

When White returned from World War II, he suffered from illness and James was forced to provide for the whole family until her husband's death in 1964. She studied hospital administration, and from 1949 to 1968, worked for a hospital board in London, England.

James began writing in the mid-1950s. Her first novel, *Cover Her Face*, featuring the investigator and poet Adam Dalgliesh of New Scotland Yard, named after a teacher at Cambridge High School, was published in 1962. Many of James's mystery novels take place against the backdrop of the UK's bureaucracies, such as the criminal justice system and the health services, arenas in which James had worked for decades starting in the 1940s.

Two years after the publication of *Cover Her Face*, James's husband died and she took a position as a civil servant within the criminal section of the Home Office. James worked in government service until her retirement in 1979.

She is an Anglican and a Lay Patron of the Prayer Book Society. Her 2001 work, *Death in Holy Orders*, displays her familiarity with the inner workings of church hierarchy. Her later novels are often set in a community closed in some way, such as a publishing house or barristers' chambers, a theological college, an island or a private clinic. Over her writing career James has also written many essays and short stories for periodicals and anthologies, which have yet to be collected. She revealed in 2011 that *The Private Patient* was the final Dalgliesh novel.

James 2011 book, *Death Comes to Pemberley*, is a "sequel" to Jane Austen's classic, *Pride and Prejudice*.

**Film and television**

During the 1980s, many of James's mystery novels were adapted for television in the UK. These productions have been broadcast in other countries, including the USA on its PBS channel. These productions featured Roy Marsden as Adam Dalgliesh. The BBC has since adapted *Death in Holy Orders* (2003) and *The Murder Room* (2004) as one-off dramas starring Martin Shaw as Dalgliesh.

Her 1992 novel *The Children of Men* was the basis for a 2006 feature film of the same name, directed by Alfonso Cuarón and starring Clive Owen, Julianne Moore and Michael Caine. Despite substantial changes from the book, James was reportedly pleased with the adaptation and proud to be associated with the film.

**Awards**

1971 Macallan Silver Dagger for Fiction (Crime Writers' Association): *Shroud for a Nightingale*

1975 Macallan Silver Dagger for Fiction: *The Black Tower*
1986 Macallan Silver Dagger for Fiction: *A Taste for Death*
1987 Cartier Diamond Dagger Lifetime Achievement Award (Crime Writers’ Association)
1992 Deo Gloria Award: *The Children of Men*
1999 Grandmaster Award (Mystery Writers of America)
(From Wikipedia.)

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**Discussion Questions**

Use our LitLovers Book Club Resources; they can help with discussions for any book:

- [How to Discuss a Book](#) (helpful discussion tips)
- [Generic Discussion Questions—Fiction](#) and [Nonfiction](#)
- [Read-Think-Talk](#) (a guided reading chart)

Also consider these LitLovers talking points to help get a discussion started for *Death Comes to Pemberley*:

*(Dear Reader: Some questions, though not all, assume a knowledge of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Also, there are a few spoiler questions at the end. Be careful.)*

1. Compare the "Prologue" of *Death Comes to Pemberley* with the "Epilogue" of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Are the two similar? Different? In what ways does James expand on Austen's version of the several years following Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage?

2. Can you point to some echoes of the original language from *Pride and Prejudice* in the descriptions and/or dialogue of James's sequel? Start, perhaps, with the first lines of both books.

3. What about the characters of *Death Comes to Pemberley*? Has James maintained their essential natures and personalities...or changed them in some way? How consistent are they with Austen's originals? Consider Elizabeth and Darcy, the Bingleys, the Wickhams, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

4. Follow-up to Question 3: James provides greater access to Fitzwilliam Darcy's state of mind than Austen permitted her readers. What do you learn about Darcy that you didn't know before? Does your opinion of him change...or remain the same as it did after reading *Pride and Prejudice*? If you haven't read *P & P*, what conclusions do you reach regarding Darcy's character?

5. When the murder is first discovered, Wickham utters, "I killed him.... It's my fault." How did you interpret his confession? Were you ready to believe in his guilt?

6. Good crime writers like P.D. James embed clues early on in their stories. What seemingly inconsequential clues are dropped that later turn out to be decisive in solving the mystery. How
7. Mystery writers also like to throw in red herrings. Are there any false clues in *Death Comes to Pemberley* that fooled you, leading you to expect a different outcome?

8. In what ways does P.D. James highlight class distinctions in this work? Why, for instance, does the Magistrate Selwyn Hardcastle not wish to waste his time at Pemberley? How are servants treated at Pemberley; compare that to how they’re treated at Mrs. Hurst’s in London?

9. Why does the colonel speak to Elizabeth rather than to Darcy about his desire to marry Georgiana?

10. Elizabeth watches Georgiana and Alveston interact and realizes the two are in love. She reflects on "that enchanting period of mutual discovery, expectation and hope. It was enchantment she had never known." Why does Elizabeth think this? Is she not in love with her husband?

11. Follow-up to Question 10: When Elizabeth gazes down at Wickham, who is sleeping with "his dark hair tumbled on the pillow, his shirt open to show the delicate line of the throat," she thinks he looks "like a young knight wounded in battle." Is Elizabeth a bit in love with Wickham? She wonders whether she would "have married him if he had been rich instead of penniless." This is the second time Elizabeth has questioned her motives for marrying Darcy: wondering if she had been attracted to Darcy primarily for his wealth and position. What do you think?

12. Why does Darcy never wish to speak of the incident in which Wickham had attempted to elope with Georgiana? Why does Georgiana wish the two of them would talk about it?

13. Darcy knows that this latest scandal will threaten the family reputation. Yet he seems almost relieved that, as a result, his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, will not make an offer for Georgiana’s hand. Why is he relieved? It would be a brilliant marriage for Georgiana; she would eventually become a countess.

14. An existential dread hangs over the characters at Pemberley even before the murder takes place. Elizabeth, especially, feels a deep unease, a "turmoil in her own mind." Looking from the vantage of historical hindsight, how might James be using the violent wind at the beginning of the novel as a symbol of something threatening the aristocracy?

15. How are women generally viewed in this society? How does Alveston’s ideas challenge those views? Alveston mentions Mary Wollstonecraft. Who is she? You might do a little research on Wollstonecraft—a vital figure in the 18th century, whose ideas influenced future generations. (You also may be surprised to learn the identity of her daughter.)

16. Why is Lydia Wickham never questioned about what happened in the carriage between her husband and Captain Denny? Might the fact that she isn’t questioned have anything to do with Questions 8 and 15?

17. Aside from ignoring Lydia, what other holes occur in the investigation—gaps that seem like missteps to modern readers steeped in police procedural novels and TV-serials? (Don’t neglect the ironic quip regarding 18th-century science’s inability to distinguish blood types.) What about
the inquiry and ensuing trial—how does the justice system fail there? What safeguards, present today, seem to be missing in Wickham’s court trial?

18. How does Darcy see his role as a great landowner? What responsibilities do the upper classes have in his society? As Darcy reflects back on his decision to marry to Elizabeth, does he believe it was a wise choice for a man in his position? How might his marriage have undermined his family’s position?

19. When Darcy meets Wickham at the Gardiner’s London house, what conflict does he hold with regards to proper social behavior vs. his own feelings toward Wickham? Why, in Darcy’s mind, is social etiquette necessary? What was his mother’s explanation for good manners? What role do manners play in modern society? Has today’s culture dispensed with, or maintained, good manners?

20. What is Louisa Bidwell’s chance for happiness? Is her fate a fair one? The Reverend Oliphant considers her “a highly intelligent” girl” who...

   had been given a glimpse of a different and more exciting life, but undoubtedly the best had been done for her child and probably for her.

Do you agree? Why does Elizabeth, a few lines later, feel "a twinge of regret” when she considers Louisa’s future as parlormaid at Highmarten?

21. What do you think the future holds for Wickham and Lydia?

22. Can you pick out the allusions to two other Austen novels—Persuasion and Emma?

23. Were you surprised by the revelations at the end of the mystery?

24. Is Death Comes to Pemberley a good mystery? Is it a good sequel to Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice?

(Questions by LitLovers.)
Discussion Questions

1. What do you notice about the prose style James adopts for this novel? What relationship does it bear to the style of Jane Austen? Compare for instance James's first sentence, "It was generally agreed by the female residents of Meryton that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet of Longbourn had been fortunate in the disposal in marriage of four of their five daughters" (3), to the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

2. James has provided many links in the introductory chapters that provide both the backstory of and continuity with *Pride and Prejudice*. How successful is the bridge that she creates?

3. The night before the ball, the howling wind and the turbulence of nature are contrasted with the comforts within the house. Elizabeth is experiencing "an emotion which she had never known before," a worry about "a world in which men are as violent and destructive as is the animal world" (48). What does her fear mean for the growing family at Pemberley, and how does it relate to the violent events of the story?

4. Colonel Fitzwilliam, Darcy’s cousin, wants to marry Darcy’s sister, Georgiana. But Georgiana seems to be in love with the young lawyer, Henry Alveston, whom Elizabeth calls "a paradigm of a young man" (35). Why doesn’t Elizabeth trust the colonel? What details or events raise doubts about his character, which had been so dependable in *Pride and Prejudice*?

5. What do you think of James’s re-creation of Austen’s characters, particularly Elizabeth and Darcy? How are they changed, and how are they similar to the originals?

6. Darcy thinks often of the burden of responsibility to his estate and the family name. From boyhood he had sympathized with his great-grandfather, who gave up his title and went to live in the woodland cottage with his dog (63). How does Darcy’s great-grandfather’s rejection of his social position resonate in *Death Comes to Pemberley*? Do Darcy’s feelings about George Wickham suggest that he feels somewhat guilty about the privileges he has inherited (64, 199-200)?

7. The extensive woodland on Darcy’s estate, with its “torn and hanging twigs,” its “tangled bushes,” and its confusion, presents a strong contrast to the order and rationality of the household and the cultivated grounds (67). What might P. D. James be suggesting about Elizabeth and Darcy’s world by giving the woodland such a strong presence in the novel?

8. Elizabeth is embarrassed by the fact that she once found Wickham so attractive that “she had been...close to falling in love with him” (90). Does what we see of Elizabeth and Darcy’s marriage indicate that Elizabeth has become a less teasing, witty, and playful person than she was in *Pride and Prejudice*? If so, why might this be?
9. When Alveston speaks up on behalf of Georgiana's ability to be present during the investigation, he mentions Mary Wollstonecraft, mother of *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley, and most famously the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, an eighteenth-century feminist treatise (125). What kinds of ideas does Alveston represent? Would his marriage to Georgiana be a more “modern” one than that of Darcy and Elizabeth?

10. How do the investigation and the prosecution shown in the novel differ from what we see in the modern police procedurals that P. D. James usually writes? Does Wickham receive a fair trial? Why or why not? Consider, too, the reference to the young man who was executed after being found poaching on the estate (42). Why does James include this detail in the story?

11. The scene in which Bidwell is polishing the silver for the ball introduces the reader to the servants’ private lives and their difficulties (41-45). What do you think of the way the secrets of the Bidwell family are eventually revealed? Does Wickham’s affair with Louisa come as a surprise? Does anyone among the servant families seem to be capable of the violent blows that killed Captain Denny?

12. How do you judge the character of Wickham, given the further development provided by P. D. James? Is he sympathetic? Is he careless and narcissistic? Do you agree with the Reverend Cornbinder that he is capable of remaking himself in America (257-58, 261-62)?

13. Wickham is about to be condemned to death when two surprising things happen: Mrs. Younge rushes from the courtroom and is crushed under the wheels of a coach, and a letter of confession arrives from William Bidwell (235, 238). What do you think of these sudden plot twists?

14. Darcy is deeply affected by the murder on his estate. Why does it shake his sense of identity and his earldom (109)? How does the story Wickham tells about his romance with Louisa, and the motivations surrounding it, make the troubled relationship between Darcy and Wickham more clear? Why is Lydia entirely absent from the story that Wickham tells (265-74)?

15. According to P. D. James, every mystery requires “facts which are hidden from the reader but which he or she should be able to discover by logical deduction from clues inserted in the novel with deceptive cunning but essential fairness” (from her autobiography, *A Time to Be in Earnest*, pp. 243-44). The “fairness” lies in the author’s giving the reader what is needed to solve the mystery. Were you able to guess or deduce who the killer was? If so, at what point, and on what grounds?

16. What do you think of Louisa’s resolution to marry Joseph Billings and live at Highmarten, as well as the adoption of baby Georgie by Mrs. Martin (280)? Does this seem like a good outcome for them?

17. James has some fun including references to other Jane Austen novels. Did you identify the references to *Emma* and *Persuasion*?

18. In the “Author’s Note” that precedes the novel, P. D. James writes “an apology to the shade of Jane Austen for involving her beloved Elizabeth in the trauma of a murder investigation” and adds “had she wished to dwell on such odious subjects, she would have written this story
herself, and done it better” (ix). Which aspects of this novel might Jane Austen have liked, and which aspects might she not have liked?

19. P. D. James has invented a satisfying new episode in the life of Elizabeth’s troublesome sister Lydia and her ill-chosen husband. What further episodes would you and your group members

The Telegraph

PD James on ‘Death Comes to Pemberley’

Q What do you get if you cross a Jane Austen novel with a crime thriller? A The latest fiction from PD James- ‘Death Comes to Pemberley’. Here the distinguished novelist explains why she decided to combine her two literary passions to produce a sequel which opens with a brutal murder at Pemberley.

Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennet and Rupert Friend as Mr Wickham in ‘Pride and Prejudice’

By PD James

5:40PM GMT 04 Nov 2011

Like many – probably most – novelists, I am happiest when plotting and planning or writing a new book, and the period in between, once the excitement of the publication is over, is usually spent considering what to write next. The prospect of becoming 90 was a time of important decision-making, since I had become increasingly aware that neither years nor creative energy last forever. After the publication of my latest Dalgliesh story, The Private Patient, in 2008, I decided that I could be self-indulgent and turn to an idea that had been in my mind for some time: to combine my two lifelong enthusiasms, namely for writing detective fiction and for the novels of Jane Austen, by setting my next book in Pemberley.

My own feeling about sequels is ambivalent, largely because the greatest writing pleasure for me is in the creation of original characters, and I have never been tempted to take over another writer’s people or world, but I can well understand the attraction of continuing the story of Elizabeth and Darcy. Austen’s characters take such a hold on our imagination that the wish to know more of them is irresistible, and it is perhaps not surprising that there have been more than 70 sequels to Austen’s novels.

Pride and Prejudice, which was originally titled First Impressions, was written between October 1796 and August 1797. Austen’s father wrote to a London bookseller, Thomas Cadell, to ask if he had any interest in seeing the manuscript, but he declined by return of post. It was in 1811 and 1812 that Austen revised the novel, making it shorter, and it was published in 1813 under the title Pride and Prejudice. It is frustrating that the original manuscript has not been discovered as it would have been fascinating to see what portions were excised and which retained and possibly extended.

In Death Comes to Pemberley, I have chosen the earlier date of 1797 for the marriages both of Elizabeth and her older sister Jane, and the book begins in 1803 when Elizabeth and Darcy have been happily together for six years and are preparing for the annual autumn ball which will take place the next evening.
With their guests, which include Jane and her husband Bingley, they have been enjoying an informal family dinner followed by music and are preparing to retire for the night when Darcy sees from the window a chaise being driven at speed down the road from the wild woodlands. When the galloping horses have been pulled to a standstill, Lydia Wickham, Elizabeth’s youngest sister, almost falls from the chaise, hysterically screaming that her husband has been murdered. Darcy organises a search party and, with the discovery of a blood-smeared corpse in the woodlands, the peace both of the Darcys and of Pemberley is shattered as the family becomes involved in a murder investigation.

Pride and Prejudice is the most popular of Austen’s novels and one can understand why. Its heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, clever, witty and energetic, is probably the most enchanting female character in English literature. Austen, in a light-hearted letter to her sister Cassandra, wrote: “The work is rather too light and bright and sparkling – it wants to be stretched out with… solemn specious nonsense… that would form a contrast and bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness and Epigrammation of the general style.” The style is indeed rich in wit, playfulness and epigrams, and it contains two great set pieces: the odious Mr Collins’s proposal of marriage to Elizabeth, and Elizabeth’s verbal victory over the interfering Lady Catherine de Bourgh when she arrives to warn Elizabeth against marriage to her nephew, Mr Darcy.

In one sense, Pride and Prejudice is a novel about marriage. Lydia’s elopement with Wickham is the most distressing incident in the book and, since it is based on no more than animal high spirits on her part and sexual attraction, is unlikely to be lastingly happy. Jane and Bingley are clearly meant for each other by temperament and can look forward to a lifetime together based on enduring love and common interests. Meanwhile, the happy family life of Jane’s aunt and uncle, the Gardiners, is founded on mature love and companionship, and is an attractive picture of a successful marriage.

However, Mr and Mrs Bennet are clearly mismatched, an example in Austen of a man who was so entranced by youth and beauty that he finds himself married to a wife described in Pride and Prejudice as “a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper”. The marriage of the self-important and obviously repulsive Mr Collins (Elizabeth’s second cousin and heir to the family estate at Longbourn) and Charlotte Lucas (Elizabeth’s friend) is undoubtedly mercenary. Mr Collins wants a wife while Charlotte wants a home of her own, as well as the prospect of becoming mistress of Longbourn when Mr Bennet dies. It is not, however, an unsatisfactory marriage, and when Elizabeth visits the parsonage at Hunsford, she witnesses the clever contrivance with which Charlotte ensures that she sees as little as possible of her husband.

Austen’s six completed novels are also surely unusual in portraying no satisfactory mother. Emma’s mother is dead, as is Anne’s in Persuasion, and although Mrs Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility is attractive and charming, the over-sensibility that prevented her from questioning her daughter Marianne about her relationship with the dashing Willoughby leads to tragedy for Marianne and even the risk of death.

Austen’s most satisfactory mother has to be Mrs Morland in Northanger Abbey, but I am not sure she was wise in allowing her daughter Catherine to accept an invitation from her neighbours the Allens to join them on a visit to Northanger Abbey. This was trusting too much in Mrs Allen’s good sense, of which we have little evidence.
But the worst mother has to be Mrs Bennet who, with her loud vulgarity, is a continual embarrassment to her elder daughters. Even so, Mrs Bennet's main interest in life – obtaining of husbands for her daughters – was more understandably responsible than Mr Bennet's neglect when one considers what their daughters' lives would have been had Mr and Mrs Collins inherited Longbourn before the Bennet girls were married off.

Nearly all my detective stories have had their genesis in a place and setting, which is important to any work of fiction and is particularly so in a crime novel, especially if there is contrast between peace, order and beauty and the contaminating eruption of violent death. This contrast is assured by setting a murder mystery in the grounds of Pemberley, a house that in my book enshrines married happiness, children, a household at peace with each other and a daily life in which duty to the community, learning, tradition and an ordered, civilised lifestyle embody all that is good about the age.

However, even as Elizabeth is listening after dinner to Darcy's sister Georgiana playing, she is visited by thoughts of another world outside Pemberley, the world of violence, cruelty and death. It is a world with which Austen deliberately did not deal. A new reader, particularly if not born in England, would find it difficult to believe that the brutalities and violence of the French Revolution were a recent memory, that the country was at war with France and that there were vast gulfs between the world of the prosperous country gentlemen or the successful London merchants and that of the rural and urban poor.

There is one sentence in Pride and Prejudice that always shocks me by its unexpectedness. The younger Bennet girls, returning from a visit to the officers stationed at Meryton, report among the trivial news they bring that a private has been flogged, an intrusion of harsh reality into a glittering romantic and happy novel, which is the only mention by Austen of the barbarity of the military discipline of her age.

For me, one of the joys of writing Death Comes to Pemberley was revisiting once again the world of Longbourn and Pemberley and finding, as I always do, fresh insights and delights. It also gave me an opportunity to address a problem of plotting that I found in the original novel, but I was concerned to write a true detective story with clues to the truth of what happened available to the reader and, I hope, an ending that is both believable and satisfying.

All six Jane Austen novels have a common theme that is the stuff of all romantic fiction – a worthy and attractive young woman finds her way through difficulties and disappointments to marriage with the man of her choice – but here the commonplace is transformed into high art by the pen of a genius. I must apologise to Austen for introducing into her love story what she herself described as "guilt and misery and such odious subjects" and I hope that my novel will give as much pleasure to readers as it did to me in the writing and that they will have the added joy, as did I, of returning once again to Pride and Prejudice.

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A Look Back, and Ahead, at Pemberley

By Charles McGrath, Published: December 26, 2011

Pemberley, Jane Austen fans will recall, is the large Derbyshire estate owned by Fitzwilliam Darcy, who weds Elizabeth Bennet at the end of “Pride and Prejudice,” and in “Death Comes to Pemberley,” P. D. James’s surprising new sequel to that novel, it becomes the scene of a murder.

The story is set in 1803, six years after “Pride and Prejudice” was finished (though it wasn’t published until 1813) and presumably when the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy took place. They have two young sons now, and the arrival of a third child is shortly to be announced. But their tranquillity is interrupted one wet and windy evening when an unexpected carriage comes rocketing up the drive.

Inside is Elizabeth’s airhead sister Lydia, the one who eloped with the charming but unreliable George Wickham, screaming that her husband is dead. Actually he isn’t, though many, including Darcy, for whom Wickham is a constant source of embarrassment and irritation, might wish he were. A search party discovers Wickham in the woods, drunk and bloodstained, beside the body of his best friend, Captain Denny, and he babbles what sounds like a confession. But is Wickham, although a deadbeat and a serial seducer of young women, really a murderer? Even Darcy can’t quite believe that of him.

Ms. James, 91 and the author of 20 previous books, is the greatest living writer of British crime fiction, and probably that genre’s most talented practitioner ever. It’s hard to imagine any of her predecessors — like Dorothy L. Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, Julian Symons or even Agatha Christie, who for all her plotting skills was not much of a prose stylist — having the nerve to attempt an Austen sequel, let alone the ability to pull it off.

The style of “Death Comes to Pemberley” is a loose approximation of 19th-century prose, a sort of modern equivalent, rather than a painstaking imitation. But it’s more than convincing and every now and then, as a kind of homage or reminder, hits the precise, epigrammatic Austen note.

The prologue remarks, for example: “A family of five unmarried daughters is sure of attracting the sympathetic concern of all their neighbors, particularly where other diversions are few.” And the odious Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Darcy’s aunt, makes a characteristic appearance, declaring: “I have never approved of protracted dying. It is an affectation in the aristocracy; in the lower classes it is merely an excuse for avoiding work.”

Ms. James cleverly weaves in references to both “Emma” and “Persuasion” in a way that expands the world of her novel, and “Death Comes to Pemberley” also has a descriptive density
greater than any of Austen’s books. Austen could take the 19th century, its customs and culture, for granted. Ms. James very satisfyingly recreates them.

If the novel has a weakness, oddly, it’s the mystery, which by Ms. James’s standards is pretty tame and uncomplicated. There is no detective work to speak of, because in those days there were no real police. The crime is investigated by local magistrates, of whom Darcy is one, and he has to recuse himself because of his known dislike of Wickham and because the crime happened on his property.

Needless to say, there is no forensic lab. (“I take it,” a magistrate asks a doctor called in to advise on the case, “that your clever scientific colleagues have not yet found a way of distinguishing one man’s blood from another?”)

So the mystery more or less solves itself at a local inquest and a subsequent trial at the Old Bailey, with the help of some last-minute revelations, including a letter dictated by one character on his deathbed. The whole plot feels more like an invention by Wilkie Collins, a writer Ms. James admires and may even be trying to imitate here, on grounds of historical appropriateness, than the kind of dark, intricate investigation that her favorite detective, Adam Dalgliesh, typically finds himself involved in.

The other surprise in “Death Comes to Pemberley” is that marriage has made Elizabeth Bennet, Austen’s smartest, sharpest-tongued and most beloved character, a little dull. Apparently weighed down by her responsibilities as chatelaine of Pemberley — the need to keep up appearances and propriety — she’s become earnest and dutiful, seldom speaking her mind. And though the novel keeps insisting on how much she and Darcy are in love, they get little chance to show it. Each is so involved in his or her own sphere, and so solicitous of intruding on the other, that they have to make appointments to have a conversation.

Darcy, on the other hand, who in “Pride and Prejudice” is a figure stiff, priggish and remote, mostly interesting for his fortune, is here enlarged and given a surprising inner life. He’s not Dalgliesh, exactly — he’s far less brainy — but they have an observant, brooding quality in common, and the amount of attention Ms. James devotes to him is a reminder that her strongest, most interesting characters have usually been male.

Her Darcy is full of self-doubt and self-recrimination, constantly examining his conscience with regard to Wickham and even returning in his mind several times to the subject of his own marriage. That he made the right choice in marrying Elizabeth he has no doubt, but even so, he can’t help reminding himself that “he had married in defiance of every principle which from childhood had ruled his life, every conviction of what was owed to the memory of his parents, to Pemberley and to the responsibility of class and wealth.”

Pemberley, which the novel suggests is like any great estate in having a continuing life, regardless of who happens to hold the title, turns out to be a burden more than the blessing it first appears to Elizabeth (and even more so to her grasping mother). With a great fortune, it turns out, comes great responsibility.
The most original invention in “Death Comes to Pemberley” is Darcy’s great-grandfather, an eccentric but not unsympathetic character who couldn’t stand the pressure of being lord of the manor and went to live alone in the woods with his dog.

A version of this review appeared in print on December 27, 2011, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: A Look Back, And Ahead, At Pemberley.