

Charlotte Bronte, meet 'Emma Brown.' You created her
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Charlotte Bronte, dear reader, did not write this book. But that does not mean you shouldn't read it.

In bold letters, the cover explains that "Emma Brown" is "a novel from the unfinished manuscript by Charlotte Bronte." Never mind that a mere 20 pages of that manuscript exist (they are faithfully reproduced in the first two chapters) and that the hundreds of pages the Irish writer Clare Boylan has tacked on seem more Dickensian than Brontian. Never mind that the book addresses -- horror -- the very un-Bronte topic of prostitution or that the only character who comes close to being Byronic (that glorious, mysterious, cruel, melancholic hero) plays but a small part. Never mind that the book's even-tempered narrator, whom Bronte would have used as a minor character to tell this terrible story to a passerby, is now a central figure.

It is, in short, hard to imagine the author of "Jane Eyre" writing "Emma Brown." But the novel remains a wonderful, coincidence-filled Victorian romp that Bronte lovers might read on a rainy weekend without harm to their characters.

At the beginning of the book, young Matilda Fitzgibbon is a figure of mystery when she arrives, elegantly appointed, at Fuchsia Lodge, a girls school run by a clan of single, impoverished sisters. Her benefactor, equally elegant and mysterious, quickly disappears, and Matilda's identity is called into question. She suffers from memory loss, and the discovery of her true self, a task that involves a score of characters, leads from crisis to crisis, with a handful of revelations thrown in for good measure. There is no bad situation that cannot be made worse, and worse each does become. Those affected include the book's narrator, Mrs. Chalfont, a childless widow of happy disposition who takes in young Matilda; Mr. Ellin, an equally temperate bachelor with a broken romance in his past; and the elegant but cruel Cornhill family.

It's quite the adventure. The plot twists and turns are beyond believing, but since all of them are beyond believing, each is completely believable within the world of the novel. The scope is wide --the number of characters and scenes is enormous, occasionally overwhelming. And Boylan's language is, for the most part, dead-on (a few of her lines are taken directly from Bronte's letters). "In a city where the air is made of smoke," Boylan writes of London, "its perfumes -- foul and fair -- draw its map."

It's this accuracy of tone and style that draws attention to places where the novel feels materially different from anything Bronte or her sister Emily might have written. Mrs. Chalfont, for instance, has a sly sense of humor, something utterly missing from the work of either Bronte. But even when Boylan has the tone down, a few of the plot developments are off. Discussing a criminal, Mrs. Chalfont says, "Even if they had been of her flesh, a mother cannot just sell her children." Though the language is right, selling children is not a topic one might expect from a Bronte. This is the difference between

melancholy, which the Brontes favored, and melodrama, which is what Boylan goes in for.

The most striking difference, however, is the streak of feminism that runs throughout. In the Brontes' work, even the most composed and intelligent women wish for marriage to their true loves -- "Jane Eyre," for example, is structured around the difficulties its heroine faces in marrying. This is not the case in "Emma Brown." Mrs. Chalfont is a happy, contented widow who builds a good life for herself; Matilda proves so skilled at making her way in the world that she takes another lost child under her wing and manages to provide for them both. It's a surprise, one modern readers will appreciate. (Unless, of course, some modern readers turn to the work of the Brontes specifically to escape the responsibilities of modern womanhood.)

"Emma Brown" begins with these words: "We all seek an ideal in life." This novel may not match Charlotte Bronte's ideal, but it may provide you, dear reader, with an ideal escape.

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