

Jars of Serotonin

WHEN I tell you that Cat Sebastian's new midcentury queer historical, **WE COULD BE SO GOOD** (Avon, 384 pp., paperback, \$18.99), is about two New York reporters who meet at work, become friends, move in together and fall in love, please understand that it's not about the events, it's about the going through. And the going through is wonderful: At one point a character makes some soup, and then later a different character makes more soup, and here I am weeping and prostrate because the reader knows what that soup means.

This is a book where the small, everyday decisions — to feed a stray cat, to bring home flowers with the groceries — loom large because they're how we connect with others. The reader is welcomed into a pair of lives as they become one shared world: Nick, scrappy and defensive with a caring streak he'd die before acknowledging, and Andy, the emperor of abandonment issues, whose future as a publisher could be an opportunity if he'd stop dreading it so much.

Queer oppression, the civil rights movement, white supremacy — these are tangible contexts in this novel, but they are not the subject. The subject: joy as praxis, love as liberation. You can't do the big rebellions if you can't start with the small ones.

CONTINUING THE THEME of rebellion: Contemporary Austen adaptations are exercises in seeing how far a tradition can be stretched without snapping. That's a natural fit for a Muslim romance author writing about characters of faith; Uzma Jalaluddin's debut, "Ayasha at Last," was one of the most refreshing "Pride and Prejudice" takes in decades. For her new novel, **MUCH ADO ABOUT NADA** (Berkley, 320 pp., paperback, \$16.99), she takes up my favorite of Austen's books, "Persuasion." And, honestly, knocks it clean out of the park.

The elements are familiar:

OLIVIA WAITE is the Book Review's romance fiction columnist. She writes queer historical romance, fantasy and critical essays on the genre's history and future.

When the would-be tech engineer Nada and her ex, Baz, are forced together despite their long-nursed resentments, they ultimately come to a more complete understanding of their past and present selves. Jalaluddin translates Austen's pervasive social restrictions beautifully to the insular, somewhat conservative dating world of first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants, where reputations can be shattered in an afternoon and matchmaking is seen as a competitive sport.



MICHELLE BUTTIGNOL

"Persuasion" retellings, like all second-chance romances, have to find a balance between a breakup serious enough to stick for years and a resolution that lets the reader trust those issues have been overcome. It's hard for me to think of a time I've seen it done this elegantly; when the reveal came I actually gasped aloud. It is, in a word, brilliant.

If you were disappointed in last year's Dakota Johnson adaptation, Jalaluddin will heal the hurt. This book layers a steady strain of melancholy beneath messy and funny top notes — one of those romances where you feel the whole journey, all the little moments piling up into something roaringly powerful, like snowflakes forming an avalanche.

AVALANCHE IS ALSO a fitting word for the way genre trends can roar down the mountain and sweep everything else before them.

Lately the portmanteau on everyone's lips is "romantasy" — as in romantic fantasy — and I side-eye the term but adore the results. Paranormals are always with us, but the current crop have a lightness that harks back to 1990s fantasies like Shanna Swendson's "Enchanted, Inc.," or Karen Harbaugh's Regency ballrooms teeming with vampire viscounts and lovelorn Greek gods.

This summer's sweetest confection, and a rom-com that earns the title, is J.C. Cervantes's **THE ENCHANTED HACIENDA** (Park Row, 368 pp., \$30). Harlow Estrada is trying to live her publishing dreams in New York, but a surprise layoff and a bad breakup send her fleeing home to her family's flower farm in Mexico.

The Estrada women are no ordinary florists, however: They grow magical blooms used for truth serums, memory removers and dangerous, desirable love potions. Soon Harlow is caught up in the delivery of a bonding bouquet for an older couple, and flirting with the bouquet customer's attractive, mysterious grandson. But is it real love? Or is there some hidden floral enchantment tricking Harlow and Ben into infatuation?

This book is like dipping your brain into a jar of serotonin. It's hilarious at the start and heart-breaking toward the end. If it's not quite as sharp as Sangu Mandanna's "The Very Secret Society of Irregular Witches," it's definitely sexier: Everything is flowers and foliage and food and drinking.

Mandanna's book was oriented toward the future, asking what we owe our children, Cervantes's is about what we've inherited from the past. Are traditions sources of power, or traps that demand sacrifices of our hopes and dreams? How do we square our needs as individuals with the demands of a family? Can we recover from the devastation when we lose loved ones? These are simple questions, but they are simple the way a blade is simple, and Cervantes makes their edge palpable. Perfect for flaying open your heart on a summer afternoon, with a glass of something cool to soothe the sting. □

150

cups of drip coffee

10

very caffeinated staff testers

2

months scrutinizing coffee grounds

One

easy way to make every sip worth savoring

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