Ruby in Paradise


Last year Jane Austen seemed to fill every screen. We had film or TV adaptations of *Emma, Persuasion, Sense and Sensibility, and Pride and Prejudice,* with more reportedly on the way. Yet the recent Janeite revival was anticipated by a box-office sleeper that borrowed from Austen far more imaginatively than any of its successors: Victor Nunez’s *Ruby in Paradise.* With roots in *Northanger Abbey,* *Ruby* took top honors at the 1993 Sundance Film Festival, went on to rave reviews, and then dropped out of sight.

It’s not hard to guess why: unlike the other Austen makeovers, *Ruby* projects a deeply disquieting vision. There’s plenty to irk viewers in *Persuasion, Emma, Sense and Sensibility,* and *Pride and Prejudice;* all the offense, however, is set in the picturesque English past. *Emma*-inspired *Clueless,* on the other hand, is a veritable catalog of contemporary American decadence; but its laser-sharp portraits of an appallingly “clueless” society are hard to take either personally or seriously, given the film’s wealthy characters and burlesque style.

*Ruby in Paradise* offers few such distractions. The time is now, the society is familiar, and the tone is sober. *Ruby* surveys the havoc of late-20th-century American life and asks: What sort of integrity is possible here? Today, that question—worthy of Jane Austen—is rarely answered without resorting to cynicism or nostalgia. Austen-like, this smart, graceful movie avoids both temptations. Along the way, eschewing old clichés about freedom and new ones about sisterhood, it makes one of the most nuanced feminist statements of any film in recent memory.

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No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and her own disposition, were all equally against her.

"Those are my odds!" Ruby exclaims. She’s wrong: her odds are even worse. The accuracy of that judgment depends of course on what you mean by “an heroine.”

Austen meant the female paragons who frequented the popular fiction of her day. The sentimental and Gothic novels that were all the rage in Georgian England featured young women who were impossibly beautiful, virtuous, cultured, and fortu-
nate—ingenues who spoke several languages flawlessly, played the piano and the harp with ease, and withstood fearsome perils without ever once compromising their virtue or losing their composure. Austen found such creatures absurdly un-"natural"; Catherine Morland, the heroine of Northanger Abbey, would be a corrective.

Handicapped by undistinguished parentage, limited means, meager accomplishments, and looks that are only "almost pretty," Catherine is an eager but unremarkable young woman who, for all her ordinariness, still finds her way in the world. In Northanger Abbey the world is represented by the promiscuous society of Bath, then England’s premier resort; and the novel begins with the 17-year-old Catherine’s maiden journey from her home in a Wiltshire village to the popular spa. Finding her way means learning whom to trust and how to act on her convictions—a crucial assignment for the unwed daughters of the financially pressed small gentry, and for the gullible Catherine, a particularly hard lesson.

Ruby in Paradise relocates the Catherine Morland story to modern America. The film’s first shot pans across the rear of a beat-up Chevelle bearing a Tennessee license plate. In the next frame the same car is slowly moving down a darkening highway. The camera closes in on the face of the intent young woman at the wheel and then, in a series of rapid flashbacks, glimpses what she’s just left behind: a steepled church in a mean Appalachian village; an angry man rushing out of a small wooden house and hurling his boot in the wake of her departing car; and finally, the road itself, its double yellow dividing line rushing into the past.

Once again, a country-bred ingenue travels from her backwater home to a popular watering place—a move that, like Catherine Morland’s trip to Bath, signifies “entrée into life” and heralds daunting challenges to the heroine’s morale and morality. Ruby Gissing’s destination is northern Florida, a locale that Victor Nunez knows well, as he demonstrated in A Flash of Green (1979) and Gal Young ‘Un (1984). Ruby is bound for Panama City—the “Redneck Riviera,” according to one sweatshirt—the Gulf Coast town that she visited with her family when she was ten, “on the only vacation that I can remember.” Now, a decade or so later, she’s on a mission, not a holiday, looking for much the same thing as Catherine Morland seeks in Bath: a place in the world, and not just any place. To get there, she too must undergo a difficult education. Ruby asks her new girlfriend Rochelle (Allison Dean), a college student at the local state university, “What would you teach—children, I mean?” Rochelle, who is about Ruby’s age and black, doesn’t hesitate: “How to survive—with your soul intact.” “Yes,” says Ruby, “I guess that’s it.” To master that curriculum, Ruby must overcome all Catherine’s disadvantages and yet another: she’s on her own.

Modern readers tend to notice first how Austen’s heroines are constrained by dense social ties. But Catherine’s connections also smooth her way. She comes to Bath as the guest of the wife of the largest proprietor in her family’s neighborhood. In a time when a respectable young unmarried woman required a chaperone, such a companion was indispensable. Catherine’s hostess, Mrs. Allen, is a self-absorbed fool, but she has her uses: she not only conveys Catherine to Bath but takes her to dances and has Mr. Allen inquire into the character of Henry Tilney, the fetching young man who dances with Miss Morland one evening at the Pump Room.

No such help is available to Ruby Lee Gissing. She travels alone. Isolated and anonymous, she faces another challenge that never troubles Catherine Morland: she has to support herself. It’s autumn—off-season in Panama City—and though work is scarce, Ruby talks herself into a job as a salesclerk at Chambers Beach Emporium, a gift shop catering to the tourist trade.

This is a Catherine Morland for the 1990s. But screenwriter-director Nunez didn’t stop there. In a gesture that situated the unlikely heroine even more precisely in our time, he stripped Ruby of Catherine’s most elementary social resource: a good family or, for that matter, any family at all. Of a father or siblings, there’s not a word. Ruby remembers her mother as a bulwark—"After Mother passed," she tells Rochelle, “everything went bad all around”—and as a dupe and defender of fundamentalist religious belief. “It was all a bloody mean trick,” she says, one that turned on “guilt and shame.” She’s determined not to be taken in again—by anything or anyone. In the diary she begins in Panama City, Ruby writes that at home “it was do this, do that. Now it’s up to me.”

If Catherine never utters such a sentiment, it’s partly because Austen has provided her with good parents whose child-rearing partakes equally of common sense, latitude, and affection. Catherine knows that no matter what happens, she can always go home. And home she goes, after Henry Tilney’s despotically rude father rudely turns her out of Northanger Abbey.

In Ruby’s America, the domestic sanctuary has vanished. None of the other young people Ruby meets
in Panama City mentions a father; mothers are absent, irrelevant, or inept; and everyone appears to be an only child. With adult authority and family life in disrepair, the young have to fend for themselves. Differently stated, Ruby is free—unaided but also encumbered by relatives and relations. Nunez exposes the illusions of such freedom, the freedom of classic liberal society: thus liberated, individuals are stranded and vulnerable.

Young women are especially vulnerable to unscrupulous men. Both heroines attract a dangerous cad. In Northanger Abbey, John Thorpe’s “endless conceit” roils Catherine from the start; but because he is the brother of a girlfriend and the schoolmate of her own brother James, she initially puts up with him. After two provoking rides in his carriage, she finally musters the wherewithal to decline his invitations—a step that, for the callow heroine, constitutes an unprecedented act of self-possession. But Catherine’s resistance jeopardizes her future, as Thorpe avenges the rebuff by maligning her family to the vain and overbearing General Tilney. The result is her untimely eviction from Northanger Abbey and the suspension of her hopes of marriage to the general’s son.

In contrast to the virginal Catherine, Ruby, a “natural” woman of the late twentieth century, is sexually knowing. She’s also no pushover: “I got out of Manning,” she tells Rochelle, “without getting pregnant or beat up—that’s saying something.” Nevertheless, Ruby’s dealings with men lead to an even more harrowing predicament than the one that overtakes her. When he presses her for another date, she tells him, “I didn’t come all this way to be your chippy.”

But Ricky won’t be put off so easily. One night he shows up drunk and angry at Ruby’s cottage and tries to rape her. After a terrifying struggle and the timely return of neighbors, she manages to escape. Just before he leaves, though, Ricky delivers a final blow: he tells her she’s fired.

“Nothing good comes of being a fool,” writes Ruby in her journal. In the present era of victimage, it is worth noting that this heroine is clearly implicated in her plight. Ruby’s susceptibility to Ricky’s wiles helps plunge her into difficulties far worse than the ones confronting Catherine Morland: Catherine has lost the promise of security and happiness; Ruby stands on the brink of destitution.

The film’s resolution of this crisis conspicuously departs from Austen’s plot. In Northanger Abbey, the hero saves the day. Defying his father, Henry Tilney rushes to the Morland home and makes Catherine a proposal of marriage, which she accepts with alacrity. In Ruby’s case, such a dénouement is impossible, though not because she lacks the marital option, or at least a passable equivalent. Though Ricky Chambers finds her home alone, by the time of his nasty call Ruby has a new and more plausible man in her life.

Her second suitor is Mike McCaslin (Todd Field), a young nurseryman she meets while she is buying a houseplant. Like Henry Tilney, Mike McCaslin has “a very intelligent and lively eye” and is, “if not quite handsome,” then “very near it.” As Mike affably informs Ruby, he is “a nice guy.” He has steady, proudful work. He is gentle, patient—and sexy. He lives in a roomy cottage filled with comfortable old furniture, handsome quilts, soft light, and lots of books. He can cook (Ruby can’t). In the morning he sits on the deck overlooking a pond and plays Liszt on his trombone. He is even ready to make a commitment—the contemporary version of Henry Tilney’s marriage offer.

But where Henry succeeds in his suit, Mike fails. That’s because life with “a nice guy”—the indispensable confirmation of Catherine Morland’s success—is peripheral to Ruby Gissing’s enterprise. Ruby wonders why she didn’t deter Ricky Chambers by telling him that she had a new boyfriend. “Maybe,” she muses, “I didn’t want that to mark me: Hands off. I’m some other man’s lady.” On the face of it, her independent stance seems radically opposed to Catherine’s demure solicitation of Henry Tilney. But Ruby is faithful to the spirit, if not to the letter, of Catherine’s venture. For Catherine, who has no better alternative, marriage to a decent man is a sensible goal. Considering the state of family and marriage depicted in the film, Ruby’s wish to maintain unmarked by her asso-
associations with men may be as prudent a desire as Catherine’s wish to be a wife.

Ruby seeks more than independence, however; she craves out-and-out respect—an item that is not on Catherine Morland’s wish list. Indeed, engaging Henry Tilney requires Catherine to accommodate his disdain for female intellect, a disdain mixed with the nicest sort of praise. “No one,” says Henry, “can think more highly of the understanding of women than I do. In my opinion, nature has given them so much, that they never find it necessary to use more than half.”

Henry is being clever, but Austen let ostensibly half-witted womanhood have the last word. “Where people wish to attach,” she wrote, “they should always be ignorant.”

To come with a well-informed mind is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid. A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can.

In this respect Catherine Morland has little to hide, a condition of which she is, however, “heartily ashamed.” Her mortification, the narrator comments, is itself naïve: Catherine “did not know that a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man, unless circumstances are particularly untoward.” And here Catherine does not fail.

Given Henry Tilney’s quasi-feminist rhetoric, we might expect him to prefer a lively bluestocking. Instead, he is utterly charmed by the untutored Miss Morland, who eagerly solicits his opinions about literature, landscape, and what a later age calls gender relations. In the end, we are assured, Henry “delighted in all the excellencies of [Catherine’s] character.” The truth, however, is that “the only cause of his giving her a serious thought” in the first place “had been . . . a persuasion of her partiality for him.”

In Austen’s day, the recommendation that women who “wish to attach” had better hide their wits was practical, if noticeably unromantic, advice. The narrator of Northanger Abbey admits that the text’s account of Henry’s interest in Catherine is “dreadfully derogatory of an heroine’s dignity,” but contends that the tale mirrors “common life.” Nearly 200 years later, that contention may still hold true.

Say, then, that Ruby’s heroine will not resign herself to the common female lot. She wants to be noticed for her own “excellencies” and not merely for “administering to the vanity of others” or for having received the perquisites that often reward such services. That sort of recognition, she soon discovers, is not to be readily had from Mike McCaslin.

For despite his unassuming job and his casual style—jeans, motorcycle, old leather jacket—Mike is a snob, a patrician by temperament and, in a quirky American way, by birth. Descended from the first white men to settle Panama City, he takes a proprietary interest in the local environment and its past. Ruby writes in her journal: “He knows about how the Indians lived and where the Spanish first landed” and “how things started going wrong almost from the start.” In Mike’s view, things are still going wrong—in a big way. He takes Ruby to see the old bridge where he and his grandfather used to fish, then points to a big ugly span that’s under construction. “Ain’t nobody,” he says (evoking the Faulkner protagonist with whom, less one letter, he shares a name), “goin’ to be fishing” off this one. Once he worked to make things better, but now he regards environmentalism as a lost cause. His present task is to practice “low-impact living” and to “[keep] the record straight.”

Mike invites Ruby into his world. He lends her books—it’s his copy of Northanger Abbey that she peruses—and solicits her opinions about what she’s read. At the same time, he disparages her judgment. Over Ruby’s objections, he insists that they walk out on an action film that he deems “crap.” When she looks out over the Gulf and murmurs, “No matter how much they mess things up, there’s always that ocean,” he shrugs: “Polluted and dying. There it is.” He belittles her job as a mere “selling game.” “It can’t mean anything,” he asserts. “It can’t be the reason you’re here.” If she wants to find out the real reason, her best bet, in his opinion, is to let him show the way: “You just need a guy to aim you in the right direction.”

That advice grates on Ruby, whose main project is figuring out how to steer by her own compass. When she articulates that desire in her journal, she displays a feminist sensibility; openly protesting Mike’s condescension, she affirms a more inclusive ideal. “People have to make up their own minds!” she retorts, after he’s blasted shoot-'em-up movies. At the end of their big fight, she implores him to “please stop looking down at the rest of us!” She speaks for those who lack the roots to sustain a sense of history, the intellectual capacity or training to relish high culture, the luck to have found work they love and respect—for the rubes, as it were.

That position has no counterpart in Northanger Abbey. Austen disparaged pretension, but she was no
democrat. She recognized an aristocracy of virtue whose members’ display of “real taste”—as her narrator terms the cultural acumen exhibited by Henry Tilney—merited deference. By Austen’s criteria, Ruby, ill-informed and utterly undeferential, is simply impudent.

In designating Mike McCaslin as Ruby’s foil, Nunez made it hard to dismiss her complaints. When Mike objects that her job is just “a selling game,” she counters: “It’s a game whose rules I understand. For awhile, that’s just going to have to be enough. It’s better than having no game at all.” It’s this last, daunting possibility—“having no game at all”—that sets the standard. From Ruby’s vantage, her job at Chambers, however banal (or worse) it may seem to the Mike McCaslins of the world, is the only opportunity she can presently grasp. Mike can afford to scorn the market; she can’t. And until he can point out a viable alternative—moving in with him doesn’t count—his strictures will sound to her like so much “gloom-and-doom crap.”

Envisioned by its author as an antiromantic work, Northanger Abbey has a conventionally romantic finale: “Henry and Catherine were married, the bells rang and everybody smiled.” For a moment, Ruby in Paradise seems headed for its own smiling conclusion: Mike says he’s sorry, Ruby forgives him, and they embrace. To an audience brought up on Hollywood endings (or the novels of Jane Austen), it’s a seductive moment. But with the camera still fixed on the sweet conciliatory hug, Ruby says, in a voiceover: “That’s when I started seeing less of Mike.” Resolutely unsentimental, this plot leaves its heroine unattached. It does not, however, leave her alone, and it is Ruby’s lasting associations—with other women—that point up the saving moral of her story.

It’s a moral she has yet to learn when Ricky puts her out on the street. At that point, proud to a fault, she’s still determined to make it on her own. Having concealed her liaison with Ricky, she lies to Rochelle about why she’s left Chambers, letting Mildred take the blame; avoids Mike; and looks for another job. In the dead of winter, the only thing she can find is work, Northanger Abbey has a conventionally romantic finale: “Henry and Catherine were married, the bells rang and everybody smiled.” For a moment, Ruby in Paradise seems headed for its own smiling conclusion: Mike says he’s sorry, Ruby forgives him, and they embrace. To an audience brought up on Hollywood endings (or the novels of Jane Austen), it’s a seductive moment. But with the camera still fixed on the sweet conciliatory hug, Ruby says, in a voiceover: “That’s when I started seeing less of Mike.” Resolutely unsentimental, this plot leaves its heroine unattached. It does not, however, leave her alone, and it is Ruby’s lasting associations—with other women—that point up the saving moral of her story.

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Help arrives at last, in an unexpected form. One evening Mildred Chambers appears at her door. After telling Ruby that she won’t be bothered again by Ricky, Mildred asks her to return as the assistant manager of the shop. The offer is accepted.

Ruby triumphs, on terms that Catherine Morland could not have imagined. Her success and her status as a representative heroine are credible only in a society in which women look to the market rather than to the family for sustenance. The film makes brutally clear the costs of that shift and the suffering it entails. But it also presents the workplace outside the home as the context of social relations that enable women to survive. While the men either recoil from the market (Mike) or embody its worst qualities (Ricky), the women grapple with its merciless impersonality.

Ruby’s deliverance turns partly on her newfound readiness to rely on other women. While still at the laundry, she admits to Rochelle the real reason that she left Chambers Beach Emporium. Without telling Ruby, Rochelle shares that confidence with Mildred, who then asks Ruby to come back to work.

As befits the realism of the tale, the goodwill of Ruby’s women colleagues has nothing to do with any innate female aptitude for compassion. Rather, the critical dispensations involve hard choices and considerable hazards: Mildred has to admit her failure as a mother; Rochelle has to risk losing her job. What enables each of them to rise to the occasion is the clear-eyed recognition that Ruby’s predicament is in essential respects hers as well.

For Mildred Chambers, that identification begins when Ruby comes looking for a job. Months later, on her penitential visit, Mildred explains why, in a slow season, she took Ruby on: “You were hungry. There was a rage and a fury that I recognized from a long time ago.” The impression of common history extends to dealings with men. Her son, Mildred tells Ruby, is just like his “long-forgotten ass of a father.” Well before Rochelle’s call, she’s realized that Ricky has been exploiting her financially, and that she’s allowed him to exploit her emotionally as well. For Mildred to credit Rochelle’s account of Ruby’s disappearance, rather than Ricky’s, means that maternal folly has been superseded by hard-won insight.

Rochelle also identifies with Ruby’s struggles. Another college student working a part-time job might snub Ruby Lee Gissing, but Rochelle regards her as a comrade-in-arms. This matter-of-fact egalitarianism may have something to do with Rochelle’s race and class. Surely it has to do with her sex. She warns her shopmate not to get involved with Ricky; she sees Ruby through hard times by lending her money; and she risks her own job by revealing to
Mildred how Ricky has manipulated her and Ruby both, and why. Like the redeeming comrades of color in classic American literature, Rochelle is as brave as her white pal, and wiser. Having set the moral agenda for the heroine, she helps her live up to it.

Ruby comes through, thanks to Rochelle’s generosity, Mildred’s integrity, and her own grit. But survival comprises only one half of her curriculum; the other concerns the state of her “soul.”

Victor Nunez took more from Northanger Abbey than an idea for a heroine and the rudiments of a plot. He also adopted the novel’s preoccupation with the way cultural conventions shape, and misshape, our sense of possibility. The book keeps that interest close to the surface through the narrator’s sardonic running commentary on the enticing excesses of romantic fiction. In subtler and more penetrating fashion, Ruby in Paradise also heeds signs of romance and their problematic allure.

That powerful attraction is marked in the film’s opening frames. After introducing the wayfaring heroine, the camera shifts to the dusky highway ahead. Out of the lowering night, the reflective letters of a road sign loom into view. The Chevelle’s headlights illuminate their message: “Welcome to Florida. The Sunshine State.” That greeting advertises the true romance of Ruby’s—and America’s—life.

On any road map, Florida lies south of Tennessee; but according to the charts of American myth, Ruby’s gone West—headed for the place of opportunity, a site linked in her imagination to nature. Not incidentally, Panama City faces west across the Gulf of Mexico. Soon after her arrival, Ruby makes the first of many pilgrimages down to the beach. The sun is just setting as she dips her hand into the glimmering surf and, gazing out over the waves, reverently tastes the salt water on her fingers. As she says later to Mike: “No matter how they mess things up, there’s always that ocean.”

A protagonist who forsakes a dead-end life in the settlements and thrills to inviolate nature brings to mind the heroes of classic American romance and its popular descendant, the Western. Like Thelma and Louise, Ruby flees the chauvinism of the small-town South. But her romantic impulses, unlike theirs, are projected in a realistic mode: her view of the water is always taken from a point within culture, a culture that, the film keeps reminding us, has despoiled the natural world.

Tacitly substantiating Mike McCaslin’s outlook, a pitiless camera surveys Panama City and discovers run-down motels, fast-food franchises, sleazy tourist traps, ugly high rises, and weedy lots littered with wind-blown trash. The soundtrack transmits the incessant din of machines—cash registers, cars, motorcycles, airplanes. Here nature has been mechanized and merchandised. One of the locals tells the newly arrived Ruby that she has “come out of step with the seasons,” meaning the annual cycle of tourism, not the terrestrial turning of the year. The promise of the road sign is barely realized: through most of the film the sun shines dimly over Panama City when it shines at all.

Ruby realizes that the place is neither pure nor beautiful. What’s striking, then, is that she still pays tribute to an idealized redemptive nature. At a trade fair in Tampa, Mildred Chambers asks her to pick out something for the store; Ruby chooses a set of plastic plates decorated with silhouetted couples, colored photos of palm trees, and the logo “Paradise.” Her earnest choice evokes ironies built to the same scale as those that inform the deceptively modest careers of Jane Austen’s heroines. “Isn’t it wonderful,” Mike says to Ruby, “the way Austen seems to dwell on the superficial and the comic and yet all the while revealing the contradictions and value systems of an entire society?” She doesn’t quite understand what he’s saying, but, her story indicates, Nunez does. In her final journal entry, Ruby writes: “I suppose it means more, making it in some big great city somewhere, but this is the world I found, and I guess the questions stay the same.” The film’s parting shot discreetly reminds its viewers that that world and those questions are theirs as well.

As the final credits roll to an end, a picture we’ve seen before fades into view. We’re back on the dark highway that Ruby traveled to Panama City. Once again that sign materializes on the side of the road: “Welcome to Florida. The Sunshine State.” Earlier, the audience read those words over the heroine’s shoulder. Now Ruby has disappeared, and the camera has put the viewer in her place. Now we too are driving in the dark, trying to make out poorly lit signs on unfamiliar roads. This time, however, we can call upon an interpretive resource that was not available at the start: the story we’ve just witnessed. Vanished from the screen, Ruby and her tale linger in our mind’s eye, perhaps changing the way we read the words reflected through the night.

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