

## THE ART OF PERSUASION

SUSAN MIDALIA

### ABOUT THE BOOK

Twenty-five year old Hazel West is making her way through the classics, starting with *A*. It's one way to pass the time when you've quit your job and are feeling lost and directionless.

But then she is persuaded to go doorknocking for the Greens, and she has a chance encounter on a train with an intriguing stranger. When Hazel finds herself partnered with him on a political campaign, her attraction is deepened by the strength of his convictions. He seems to be attracted to her too – but why is he resisting?

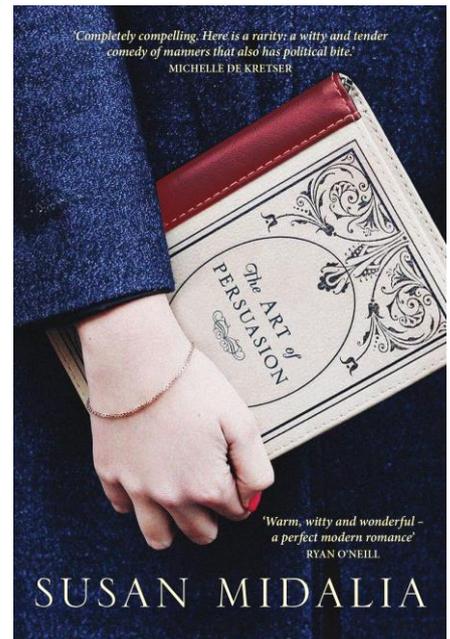
And what does Jane Austen have to teach a young woman of life, love and literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Midalia grew up in the Western Australian wheatbelt and has lived in Perth for most of her adult life. She is the author of three collections of short stories, all shortlisted for major literary awards: *A History of the Beanbag*, *An Unknown Sky*, and *Feet to the Stars*. She retired from teaching in 2007 to become a full-time writer and freelance editor. *The Art of Persuasion* is her first novel.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is this novel called *The Art of Persuasion*?
2. What is it that Hazel can learn from reading the classics, and what must she learn from life?
3. Do you think that Hazel's concerns and preoccupations are typical of a young woman living in an Australian city in 2017?
4. What value does Hazel place on friendship, and what is the role of Beth in the novel?
5. *The Art of Persuasion* is a romantic comedy – so what is the purpose of politics in this novel, and how does the author blend the two?
6. What would you see as the intersections between the plot of this romantic comedy and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*?
7. What picture of a Greens supporter do you take from reading this work?
8. How does the book define what it means to be a good citizen?
9. How does the author use different characters as vehicles for different ideas and subject positions?
10. How does she use comedy and lightness to explore some serious subject matter?
11. What difference do you think an individual can make in a world where many things are troubled and broken?
12. Why is teaching a different experience for Hazel this time round?
13. What does Hazel learn from her students at Cranfield High?
14. In what ways is Adam the typical hero? What are his strengths and what are his failings?
15. What conclusions does Hazel reach about parenting, and her role in the life of Jessie?
16. Is the love that Hazel finds the love that she has been looking for?
17. What do you think the 'happily ever after' might look like in Hazel's and Adam's world?



## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

***What drew you to write a novel that touched on the themes and concerns of Jane Austen's work? What points of departure and difference did you discover as you wrote your modern romance?***

I'm interested in Jane Austen's understanding of love as a moral concept; how we fall in love with a person whose values we respect and whose intelligence we admire. I'm also drawn to the subtlety of Austen's presentation of sexual attraction: because 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers of literary fiction had to represent sex in coded or oblique ways, Austen's novels are far more erotic than sexually explicit novels. I also like following the heroine's journey to self-knowledge and maturity. Finally, I like Austen's comic mode of writing, because her use of wit makes her novels so enjoyable to read, and because comedy is an optimistic way of viewing human experience.

The main difference between Austen's work and my novel is in the treatment of politics. Her novels are always about class difference and gender politics, but they don't depict the larger political events of her historical context – the Napoleonic Wars, for example, or the effects of the Industrial Revolution. This isn't a criticism, simply an observation; writers aren't obliged to write about anything in particular at all. By contrast, I wanted to include the 'big' global issues of climate change and refugees. My novel is also more sexually explicit (and trying hard not to be inadvertently comic or embarrassingly over-the-top). The other major difference is an issue of style, which naturally, has changed across time. While Austen's novels typically use formal language and elegantly constructed sentences, my novel is deliberately colloquial in its use of language, and sometimes meandering in its sentence structure, in an attempt to capture the voice of a contemporary, twenty-five year old woman.

***Your central characters often think about what it means to be a responsible citizen. Do you believe that being politically engaged can make a difference? Do you share the same concerns about the future of the planet as some of your characters?***

I believe that we have a moral responsibility to be politically engaged, to think about, and to care about, issues of social justice, human rights and the environment. Can such engagement make a difference? I believe it can, and it must. This doesn't mean that people have to join a political party or an organisation; the simple act of talking with people, exchanging views, in one's workplace or family, can encourage others to re-think their opinions or have a change of heart. And yes, I am intensely concerned about the future of the planet. The scientific consensus shows that if we don't start taking strong action to address climate change, we won't have a planet to sustain us in the future. It ought to alarm us, and galvanise us into doing something, but alas, it doesn't seem to register for many people, especially the decision makers and those in power.

***As much as it is a contemporary love story, this is also a novel of ideas. Did you find any tension or difficulty in integrating these elements?***

I found this the most difficult part of the novel to write, because no reader likes being lectured at. My way of trying to integrate the ideas and the romance was to create a romantic heroine and hero who are passionate about politics, reading, and family – the issues that most interest me. I wanted their dialogue to sound credible or naturalistic, while also raising questions about those issues for readers to reflect on.

***Was it fun creating a hero and heroine and throwing obstacles in their path? Do you have a favourite character?***

It was a great deal of fun. I am primarily interested in the psychological complexity of people, and I particularly like trying to imagine what it might be like to be someone very different from me. I'm a 66-year old woman who was a high-achiever at school and university, and I've tried to think, behave and sound like a 25-year-old woman who initially doesn't have a sense of purpose in life. I've been married for many years, and couldn't

imagine my life without my partner, and I've tried to create a convincing 45 year-old widower. If you ever get bored with being yourself – I frequently do – ventriloquising someone else is a highly pleasurable way to spend your time. I became very attached to my heroine and hero; I cared about them, as though they were real people. As for throwing obstacles in their path: this is the typical structure of a comic romance like my novel. It's about erotic deferral: it's not sexy to have the characters having sex on page 2; it's much more satisfying to make them wait, and to make the reader wait, until the consummation. And my favourite character? Definitely Hazel, as she bumbles and stumbles her way to maturity and a sense of vocation, while retaining her sense of kindness, modesty and sense of humour.



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