

Mr Darcy and Other Domestic Disasters

by Clair Humphries



I never thought my first published work would be inspired by sewage.

Neither did I think I'd be a finalist in the Jane Austen Short Story Award 2009, as the drama of an overflowing waste pipe seemed far removed from the sensibilities of a Regency romance. However, rule number one in creative writing classes tends to be: 'write what you know' and what I knew most about in 2009 was sewage. Alongside pest control, DIY damage limitation and numerous other domestic disasters my husband and I experienced while restoring our 'dream' home.

We'd bought our house in 2007. Previous viewings flagged up three points: re-wiring, re-plastering and hasty removal of the swirly, pub-style carpets which had infiltrated every room (even the kitchen). Undeterred, the three of us – my husband, the estate agent and

I – nodded our heads, agreeing that as it was the height of the property boom and we hadn't won the lottery, the house was a good buy. Plus it had Potential. This, I knew from countless property programmes fronted by bossy, posh women in big coats, was a Good Thing. The TV shows made it look easy: cramped galley kitchen? Grab a sledgehammer and knock through. Dodgy seventies décor? Paper over to create tasteful feature walls. Fuelled by optimism and a desire (on my husband's part) to utilise an as-yet-untapped armoury of power tools, we started our project. I envisaged a lovingly restored family home once the builders and electricians had done their thing. What I hadn't envisaged was a mouse infestation, sewage leak or the evils of asbestos – but that was yet to come.

Thus, the soundtrack to my writing became speed garage, hip hop and drum n' bass – which would have been irritating, had I not been trained in the art of pest control. Following Ron's advice, I'd manage to achieve a Zen state by accepting loud music as an essential motivational aid to their labours. Which worked up until a sledgehammer came crashing through our kitchen wall.

We moved in and my writing stalled; to paraphrase Virginia Woolf, it helps to have a room of your own to work in and that was the problem. For months,

our rooms lacked doors and/or walls, while the swirly pub-style carpets proved a constant distraction. Another distraction was also making its presence known: we had mice. And lots of them. Initially, we blamed any odd noises on creaky floorboards, or the rumblings of an unfamiliar heating system. Until the droppings appeared... Panic ensued, with white faces and hysteria all round, until our burly tattooed builders recovered themselves and adapted to their new working conditions. Our neighbour was also infested – both with cockroaches and mice – which convinced us to seek professional help. Enter Ron, our local rodent disposal expert. Pest control, according to Ron, was not just a matter of chemical warfare, but a process of understanding the creature's complex

psychological state. We had to learn to think like a pest, to analyse its needs and intellectual motivation. I was sceptical, but Ron's enthusiasm was infectious;

clearly, this was a man who loved his job. Every visit was an exciting new challenge, he told us – and he was determined to see it through, literally, to the death. Plus we lived near the town centre, so it saved on parking when he dropped his wife off at Sainsbury's.

I retreated to my laptop. At least it was portable; I moved from room to room, fleeing distractions which were made worse by the arrival of a new neighbour. As our renovations wound down, hers began in earnest. She installed her own set of builders, with their own set of power tools and, for approximately eight hours a day, a radio on which to blast out dance music anthems of the nineties. Thus, the soundtrack to my writing became speed garage, hip hop and drum n' bass – which would have been irritating, had I not been trained in the art of pest control. Following Ron's advice, I'd manage to achieve a Zen state by accepting loud music as an essential motivational aid to their labours. Which worked up until a sledgehammer came crashing through our kitchen wall.

Further setbacks occurred: gas leaks, boiler trouble, the discovery of asbestos. With each crisis my husband would respond in an admirably practical manner, using his power tools to patch and mend. My way of coping – less admirably practical – was to write, and The Jane Austen Short Story Award came at just the right time; distraught after a

blocked loo incident, I made the hero of my entry a Mr Darcy-like plumber who saves the day. Fortunately, the judges had a sense of humour and selected it for their anthology, which was how I ended up last July attending the prizewinners' lunch at Chawton. The house, where Jane Austen wrote her most famous novels, was beautiful, as was the surrounding land, complete with free-ranging sheep – although their presence did make approaching the house somewhat tricky. I arrived at the lunch feeling I'd come full circle: from a story inspired by sewage to a car park ripe with sheep dung. It was a pleasing symmetry of sorts. However, far more pleasing was the knowledge that finally, our house had become a home. Complete with a room of my own to work in.