Interpreting Jane
After reading political scientist Michael Chwe’s new book, you’ll never read a Jane Austen novel the same way again.

by CHELSEA HAWKINS

What do ’90s starlet Alicia Silverstone and UCLA political science professor Michael Chwe have in common? Well, you might say, both have 19th-century author Jane Austen to thank for inspiring significant moments in their careers.

One evening, several years ago, Chwe sat down with his wife and children to watch Clueless, a 1995 film loosely based on Austen’s 1815 matchmaking novel, Emma. As he followed the antics of Silverstone’s Cher Horowitz, a wealthy Valley Girl who parades around Beverly Hills playing a sloppy game of matchmaker, the scholar noted that all of the strategizing and manipulation happening in the teen comedy were, like, very familiar.

“That’s what I do in game theory,” said the political scientist, recalling his “aha” moment, during an interview last month at his Santa Monica home. “Game theory is all about trying to model how people anticipate each other’s behavior. If I take a certain action, what will certain people do as a result of that action?”

The viewing got Chwe, who never before picked up an Austen novel, interested in reading Emma and her other renowned books, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, Northanger Abbey and Persuasion. But his intent was not so much an appreciation of fine literature, but rather, research that would eventually provide the foundation for his new book, Jane Austen, Game Theorist, published by Princeton University Press.

Game theory, the study of strategic decision making, has more commonly been applied in economics, political science, psychology and biology, as social and physical scientists attempt to understand and sometimes predict the behaviors of markets, consumers, governments and animals, for example. And though game theory’s mathematical roots can be traced back to the Cold War era, Chwe asserts that, some 200 years ago, Austen was an early game theorist who closely studied social advancement and romantic relationships, and created characters who reflected strategic think-
The merging of Austen, whose romantic fiction is widely viewed as biting social commentaries on the gentry class of English society, and the contemporary social science theory may seem both “plausible and strange,” admitted Chwe. “A lot of people talk about scheming and how people interact in their novels, of course,” said the 47-year-old Korean American, who was born in Alabama. “But I think [Austen] was actually interested in strategic thinking as a theoretical subject, as in the sense of, ‘Let’s think about it in a systematic way, let’s think about lots of examples, when it can go wrong, why do people sometimes not think strategically, what are the concepts involved in strategic thinking?’”

Many of the themes Austen addresses, such as choice and preferences, are core elements of game theory, courses about which Chwe has taught at UCLA since 2001. Oftentimes, in Austen’s world, heroes and heroines carry out small manipulations as part of a larger social play, in order to produce the most advantageous marriages. But Austen’s novels are about more than just simple stories of courtship and marriage, Chwe said, citing a well-known scene from *Persuasion*, the writer’s last complete novel published in 1816.

“One theme in Austen is about how a relationship between two people is a strategic process,” said Chwe. “It’s not just about liking somebody, but being able to cooperate with somebody and understand what they’re trying to do at any given time.”

When protagonist Anne and suitor Captain Wentworth break off their engagement, both characters spend the next eight years pining after their lost romance, with Anne going as far as rejecting other proposals. Years later, when Anne is taking a walk with two friends and Captain Wentworth, they are stopped and offered a ride by Wentworth’s sister—but there is only one seat available. Not wanting Anne to have to walk home, Wentworth encourages his sister to invite Anne into the carriage, putting Anne in a position where she cannot politely refuse.

“What’s going on there? Well, Anne thinks, ‘He [cares] about my welfare, at least, a little bit.’” Chwe explained. “But what’s interesting is the way Captain Wentworth shows that [through] manipulation essentially. He’s thinking about, ‘How can I get Anne to accept this offer?’ And he knows that if his sister makes it specifically to Anne, then Anne would have to say yes. He’s thinking of what Anne will do as a result of his actions, which is essentially game theoretic.”

In other words, according to Chwe’s analysis, what Wentworth is doing is attempting to predict Anne’s response, and taking control of a situation that is beneficial to him because it expresses his affection through action. While contemporary game theorists may be more concerned about anticipating the actions of foreign nations or consumers, the concept is the same.

Chwe’s book ultimately shows just how widely relevant game theory is and how all of us essentially are strategic thinkers.

“A theme in [Austen’s] novels is that caring for somebody is about understanding their needs, and understanding someone’s needs and wants is a kind of manipulation,” he said. “Strategizing is not necessarily a cold thing; it’s something we do all the time to people we care about.”

Since its publication, major newspapers including the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* have brought attention to Chwe’s intriguingly unusual analysis; even Chelsea Clinton has tweeted about her excitement over the book. Of course, not everyone has been quick to embrace it, with some reviewers writing mock “response letters” in Austen’s voice, and one *Forbes* reviewer calling Chwe’s take “absurd.”

But the scholar seems nonplussed by the criticism. “Everyone has a different take, and people tend to be really protective of their own idea of Austen,” he acknowledged. “But a lot of people are totally willing to believe she is the greatest genius who ever lived, so they’re not actually surprised [by my book’s assertion] in these ways,” Chwe added, with an easy chuckle. “I’m not going to say my way of thinking about her is the only way …. She’s very complex and multilayered, so I’m not saying this is the only way, by any means. But it’s been a lot of fun.”

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**GAME THEORY “DECISION TREE”**

This diagram—known in game theory as a decision tree—shows the benefits that flow to two Mansfield Park characters under a range of scenarios involving the disposition of a knife with sentimental value. Betsey Price has laid claim to the knife, which belongs to her older sister Susan, who wants it back. For Betsey (in bold) and oldest sister Fanny (in regular type), the best payoff comes when Fanny buys a new knife, inspiring Betsey to return the old knife and restoring harmony among the sisters.

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**June 13, Korean**