In an anthology celebrating Jane Austen’s ongoing and increasing impact on the global reading community, why write about British novelist Rosamunde Pilcher? Their similarities are numerous and almost mystical. In her novels, Jane Austen captures the strange powers and attractions of domesticity while also lamenting its confinements. The limited, small worlds Austen creates increasingly draw new and younger readers into the fold of Austenites by way of abundant retellings, reconstructions, and novel adaptations such as *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (1995), *I Capture the Castle* (1948), *Brooklyn* (2009), *The Cookbook Collector* (2010), and some imagined continuations such as *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* (2004), which pick up the story where Austen leaves it. Hence, it is with the world of Rosamunde Pilcher, who has been described by *Cosmopolitan* as “a Jane Austen for our time.”

2012 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of publication of *The Shell Seekers*, a best-selling novel that continues to enjoy a wide and diverse readership across age, class, and race boundaries. As scholar Suzanne Jones has suggested, Pilcher’s stories, like Austen’s, speak deeply to the female psyche for a myriad of cultural and commercial reasons rooted in the dream-ideal of domesticity’s power to transform individuals into their best selves (Jones 326, 335, 338).

Rosamunde Pilcher’s career changed dramatically in the mid-1980s as a result of this novel’s appearance. Hitherto, she had been selling stories to women’s magazines (early on under the pseudonym Jane Fraser); now she has decided to part ways with her British publishers Mills and Boon, and writes works with more psychological depth, concern for the human condition, and attention for innovative language, character, and setting. She signed an exclusive contract with...
Thomas Dunne of St. Martin’s Press, who marketed her work to a mainstream readership. A quick visit to Amazon.com today reveals that readers who bought *The Shell Seekers* also bought books by Sherwood Anderson, Jane Hamilton, Barbara Pym, and Tobias Wolfe, which further suggests its crossover status.

The following chapter explores how Rosamunde Pilcher’s *The Shell Seekers* can justifiably be read and appreciated as a novel with strong links to Jane Austen both in terms of theme and technique. I argue that the book is a good example of what might be termed “literary fiction”—in other words, the kind of work that “focuses on style, psychological depth and character” (“Rosamunde Pilcher”). Literary fiction differs from genre fiction fundamentally in the fact that the former is character driven, the latter plot driven (Burroway 411). *The Shell Seekers* is distinguished by its innovative use of language—tone, mood, musicality, verisimilitude, antiromanticism—as well as insight into human nature in family relationships and in romantic love, and the psychological depth of its main character Penelope.

Karen Joy Fowler, author of *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2004), sums up the attraction of literary fiction in her introduction to *Jane Austen: the Complete Novels* (2006). Austen’s “enduring appeal” has a lot to do with her being “a specialist in all those things that women’s fiction has been criticized for.” She writes about women; her novels are structured around marriage plots; their focus is domestic; while the narrative technique is “located in observation and quotidian detail [rather] than in page-turning adventure” (Fowler vii). Likewise, *The Shell Seekers* focuses on women, while placing less emphasis on plot development in favor of looking at the central character Penelope Keeling’s life both sympathetically yet pragmatically.

It is instructive here for me to remember a course I took in college called “Writing the Bestseller.” As undergraduate creative writing majors with no clue how we would earn a living, we were all interested in cranking out works under a nom de plume that would pay the bills while we worked on our Great American Novels. In the guidelines that our professor procured from the Harlequin publishers, specialists in romantic fiction, we were told to write stories whose heroine was single, the hero rich, and the happy ending involved their marriage. They should neither be married nor involved with other people at the time of their meeting and falling in love. Suspense and heartbreak along the way were de rigueur, with the threat that the pair’s love might not survive—even if it does in the end. The work must be 12 chapters long, and approximately 200 pages. As a writer of literary rather than romantic fiction, Pilcher actually parodies this