

# Jane Austen

can in fact get more drama out of morality than most other writers can get from shipwreck, battle, murder, or mayhem.

—Ronald Blythe, British critic and historian

BY JESSICA TEISCH

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." Thus opens *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Jane Austen's beloved novel about class, manners, and social mores in Georgian England. Nearly two centuries after her death, Austen (1775–1817), who published six novels anonymously as "A Lady," remains one of our most revered writers. Her ironic wit, graceful plots, and parodies of social conventions resound as loudly today as they did then. She asked timeless questions about how to regard one's peers, judge human character, and solve matters of the heart. She offered lessons, too: jealousy gets one nowhere, and money can't buy happiness—though it helps. Rejecting the sentimental Gothic novels of the day, Austen brought moral realism to a world where order, not passion, ruled love, and those rules wove the fabric of society.

When Austen put ink to paper, England's small towns and villages were far removed from the Napoleonic Wars and Industrial Revolution. Although she was aware of the historical currents that would soon render her idyllic lifestyle obsolete, Austen looked inward at the human soul rather than outward at war and politics. "Pictures of perfection as you know make me sick &

wicked," she wrote as she invented the arrogant Mr. Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice* and meddling Emma Woodhouse of *Emma* (1816).

In his *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870), Austen's nephew, J.E. Austen-Leigh, wrote that, "no great crisis ever broke the smooth current" of Austen's life. Austen was born the seventh child of Cassandra Leigh Austen and the Reverend George Austen, rector of the modest parish of Steventon in Hampshire, England. The family had sufficient means, but not enough to provide Jane and her sister Cassandra with dowries—a subject to which Austen continually returned in her novels. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth's "inferior connexions" vex Darcy; Emma of *Emma*, by contrast, possesses a generous dowry of £30,000. Educated primarily by her father, Austen began writing novellas in her early teens. *Love and Freindship* (1789), *Lady Susan* (1793), and *History of England* (1791),

a spoof on Oliver Goldsmith's *History of England* "by a partial, prejudiced, & ignorant Historian," reveal her remarkable talent. In 1795, she drafted *Elinor and Marianne*, which became the classic study of female conduct, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). A year later she began *First Impressions*, the early version of *Pride and Prejudice*.

In 1801, the Reverend retired and moved his family to Bath, jeop-

## WHERE TO START

Who can deny Mr. Darcy his dark conceit in **PRIDE AND PREJUDICE**, Austen's most popular novel and a favorite on high school and college reading lists? Who hasn't (at least once) identified with the spoiled, well-intentioned heroine of **EMMA**? And, for that matter, whose approach to love do you take in **SENSE AND SENSIBILITY**? Timeless questions, all of them.

ardizing his daughters' "prospects." Although Austen wrote about courtship, love, and marriage and had two suitors herself, she never married. "If you go on refusing every offer of marriage," Mrs. Bennet tells Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, "you will never get a husband—and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead." In 1805 the Reverend died. Jane eventually moved with her mother and sister to a cottage on her brother's property in Chawton, Hampshire (see sidebar), which saved her from dreaded governess work. Austen wrote and published assiduously until 1817, when she fell ill with what historians now identify as Addison's disease. She died on July 18, 1817 at the age of 41.

## "A LADY" IN HER TIME AND OURS

Austen's novels were so popular during her lifetime that some were reissued as second editions, but critical acclaim came largely after her death. In his *Diary*, Sir Walter Scott praised Austen's "exquisite touch which renders ordinary common-places things and characters interesting" (1826). In 1870, Anthony Trollope called her a "great novelist," an opinion endorsed by Alfred Tennyson (B.C. Southam, ed., *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage, 1870-1940*, 1987). Only a few disgruntled writers like Mark Twain found the genteel English spinster "entirely impossible" to read.

Austen's novels became classics in the twentieth century. Henry James praised her "little touches of human truth," and E.M. Forster admitted to being "a Jane Austenite" (Southam, *Jane Austen*, 1987). Decades later, the 1996 BBC miniseries *Pride and Prejudice* drew 40 percent of the United Kingdom's total television audience.

That Austen's novels resound so loudly today attests to "A Lady's" modern understanding of human na-

ture. Women "still fall in love with the wrong guy," said star of *Sense and Sensibility* Emma Thompson, and they're "still worried about how they are going to survive financially" (CNN, 12/14/95). Indeed, Austen "had an idea of how to live in this imperfect world that comprised balance, moderation and consideration," noted *Salon.com* (12/2/95). In *Sense and Sensibility* the Dashwood sisters find reason. Mutual respect, not sexual attraction, inspires true love in *Persuasion*. The moral? Common sense, good manners, decency, and domestic harmony will lead to happy, debt-free lives. Then again, as Mary Crawford of *Mansfield Park* said, in ironic Austen style, perhaps "a large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of."

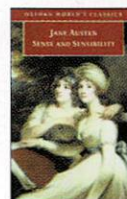
## MAJOR WORKS

### *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)

**A**usten began this novel in 1797 under the title *Elinor and Marianne*. Although advertised as "Interesting" and "Extraordinary" (euphemisms for a love story), it is not generally considered her best novel. A second, revised edition came out in 1813. Like the first, it was published in three separately bound volumes for the "circulating libraries."

**THE STORY:** When the death of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood's father leaves them without financial means, how will they find husbands? The passionate Marianne, who believes in love at first sight, falls for the unscrupulous John Willoughby, and the more prudent Elinor embraces the sensible Edward Ferrars—both not without obstacles.

**"The truth is that Miss Austen's main end is the exhibition of life and character for their own sake, and her spe-**



## AUSTEN: AN OVERVIEW

\* Discussed in Major Works

Volume the First (1787-1790),  
Volume the Second (1790-1792), and  
Volume the Third (1792-1793, published 1951)

These three collections make up Jane Austen's *Juvenalia* and contain pieces Austen wrote throughout her early teens primarily for her family's enjoyment. These works mostly parody established social and literary conventions.

*Lady Susan* (1793)

This novella, set in Regency London

and presented in the form of letters, introduces the recently widowed Lady Susan Vernon, who lies to make financially attractive marriages for herself and her teenage daughter.

\* *Northanger Abbey* (1803, published 1818)

*The Watsons* (1804, published 1871)

Published as part of James Edward Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* (1870), this fragment of a novel describes Emma Watson's decision to marry a clergyman rather than a nobleman.

\* *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)

\* *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)

\* *Mansfield Park* (1814)

\* *Emma* (1816)

*Sandition* (1817; published 1925)

Written in the last year of Austen's life, this satirical fragment of a novel, lighter in tone than *Persuasion*, recounts Charlotte Heywood's adventures at the seaside resort of Sandition.

\* *Persuasion* (1818)

*Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye (3rd ed., 1997)

Austen's witty, informative letters offer insight into her family and friends, social life, literary endeavors, and newsworthy events. New material, annotations, and indexes update R.W. Chapman's 1932 and 1952 editions. ■

cialty is not the great scene – hardly even the deciding or impelling scene – but the normal social occasion. The multiplying of these occasions without too rigid a scrutiny of their actual contribution to the outcome has resulted in a feebler story and a better novel.” O.W. Firkins, *Jane Austen*, 1920.

“If Jane Austen ever decides to come back from the dead, she could undoubtedly make millions writing self-help books. . . . Both the novel and Emma Thompson’s Academy Award-winning screenplay could bear the subtitle *Women Who Love Sleazeballs Instead of the Dull Dorks They Should Go For.*” Kristen Baldwin, *Entertainment Weekly*, 4/12/1996.

“Jane Austen has taught her readers about the nineteenth-century gentleman’s relation to his money: he has to have inherited, not made, it. . . . But the character we call the ‘reader’ has experienced certain additional pleasures: One is the moral satisfaction or – something spicier – the moral glee of seeing the cover of respectability lifted from these early nineteenth-century rich folk to expose their essential brutality, which they hasten to cover up with arguments sounding dreadfully familiar to the reader of the 1990s.” Lore Segal, *The Antioch Review*, Spring 2001.

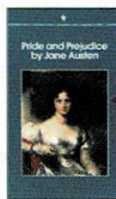
**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A tragicomedy that offers insight into finding the balance between reason and passion.

**MOVIE:** 1995, directed by Ang Lee and starring Kate Winslett, Emma Thompson, and Hugh Grant.

### Pride and Prejudice (1813)

**A**usten wrote this novel in 1796 as exchanges of letters titled *First Impressions*. In a letter to Cassandra, Austen described the heroine as “her own darling child”—but the publisher who rejected the manuscript apparently didn’t agree. When Austen revised it as *Pride and Prejudice*, she assured this comedy of 18th-century manners and class consciousness long-lasting popularity.

**THE STORY:** When Elizabeth Bennet, the generous and witty heroine, meets Mr. Darcy, an aristocratic, landed, and somewhat snobbish bachelor, it could be love. But will they allow their misguided judgements about social rank and fortune to cloud their mutual affection? “Why do you like Jane Austen so very much? I am puzzled on that point. . . . And what did I find? . . . a commonplace face; a carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck. . . . Miss Austen is only shrewd and observant.” Charlotte Brontë, 1/12/1848, to G.H. Lewes, in B.C. Southam, ed., *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, 1968.



### YESTERDAY'S COTTAGE, TODAY'S MCMANSION



Chawton cottage, in England near Alton, where Austen lived from 1809 until her death in 1817.

When Austen’s heroines were shuttled off to so-called cottages by mischievous sisters-in-law, they were not living in squalor in a one-room shack. Austen’s brother took in his two sisters and his mother to live their later years in this “cottage” on his property. The main house was, indeed, much larger. ■

“Next to Scott, there is no author of that time whose works, so unlike those of the great romanticist, are so generally familiar or read with so much real appreciation to-day as quite, homely, wholesome Jane Austen.” William Edward Simonds, *An Introduction to the Study of English Fiction*, 1894.

“It is charming. – Nothing was ever better conducted than the fable; nothing can be more piquant than its dialogues; more distinct than its characters. Do, I entreat, tell me by whom it is written. . . . I have the three vols now in the house, and know not how to part with them.”

Sarah Harriet Burney, British novelist, 12/6/1813, in *The Letters of Sarah Harriet Burney*, ed. Lorna J. Clark, 1997.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Austen’s most popular novel. Ah, if we all only had a Mr. Darcy of our own!

**MOVIE:** 1940, MGM, directed by Robert Z. Leonard and starring Laurence Olivier and Greer Garson; 1996, BBC TV Miniseries, directed by Simon Langton and starring Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle.

### Mansfield Park (1814)

**U**nlike her previous novels, *Mansfield Park* assumes a serious tone. Austen collected reactions to this complex novel in *Opinions of Mansfield Park* soon after publication. Critics generally called Fanny prudish and morally abhorrent. “Nobody, I believe,” Lionel Trilling remarked, “has ever found it possible to like the heroine.”

**THE STORY:** The timid Fanny Price, a poor relation, grows up in her aunt and uncle’s wealthy household at Mansfield Park without enjoying its benefits. Only her cousin Edmund Bertram treats her as an equal. When



a charming pair of siblings, Henry and Mary Crawford, enters the scene, they test their peers' moral sensibilities.

**"In most novels you are amused for the time with a set of Ideal People whom you never think of afterwards. . . whereas in Miss A--'s works, & especially in *M[ansfield] P[ark]* you actually live with them, you fancy yourself one of the family; & the scenes are so exactly descriptive, so perfectly natural, that there is scarcely an Incident, or conversation, or a person, that you are not inclined to imagine you have at one time or other in your Life. . . been acquainted with."** Lady Gordon, *Opinions of Mansfield Park*, 1814-1815.

**". . . thought it quite as clever, tho' not so brilliant, as *P. & P.* – Fond of Fanny. – Delighted much in Mr. Rushworth's stupidity."** Cassandra Austen, *Opinions of Mansfield Park*, 1814-1815.

**"The moral or morals of *Mansfield Park* are doubtless sound enough, but I do not feel that they are powerfully or skillfully enforced. . . . The book has much that is valuable and attractive, but in soundness of plan, in fundamental health, it impresses me as notably inferior both to *Emma* and to *Pride and Prejudice*."** O.W. Firkins, *Jane Austen*, 1920.

**"[It] is not surprising that *Mansfield Park* was not among the novels initially adapted for film or that the filmmaker altered the novel so radically. Although *Mansfield Park* has never been without defenders, it has long been regarded as Austen's least-popular novel, largely because of the supposed unattractiveness of the novel's heroine, *Fanny Price*."** Germaine Paulo Walsh, *Perspectives on Political Science*, Winter 2002.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A more solemn and less beloved addition to Austen's playful, gossipy parodies of love in 18th-century England.

## Emma (1816)

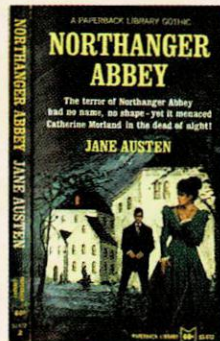
**A**s she wrote her fourth novel, Austen noted, "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like." Yet it's easy to fall in love with this novel about courtship, class, and compassion, in which the heroine, much like Austen's heroines before her, overcomes personal obstacles that keep love at bay.

**THE STORY:** Emma Woodhouse, "handsome, clever, and rich. . . had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her." Then the young heiress of the provincial town of Highbury, determined not to marry, befriends the poor Harriet Smith and schemes to find her a husband. When her meddling backfires, she's forced to redress her errors.



## WHO KNOWS WHAT EVIL LURKS IN THE HEART OF MARKETERS?

Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is well-known as a light-hearted parody of Gothic literature. But concepts like irony and parody get lost when it's time for marketing. So in 1965, *Northanger* was released as an actual



"Paperback Library Gothic," complete with a bloodcurdling cover. With a well chosen edit here and there, even the promotional quotes make the sound of the wind seem like an intruder:

**The promotional copy on the 1965 back cover reads:** "The wind roared down the chimney as the rain beat in torrents against the windows, and every

nerve-shattering sound seemed to speak the awfulness of her situation. While the storm raged, there was an increase in tempo of other frightening sounds, more terrific even than the wind, which howled at intervals on her startled ear. In one moment the very curtains of her bed were startled into motion, and at another the lock of her door was agitated, as if by the attempt of somebody to enter. Hollow murmurs seemed to creep along the gallery and more than once her blood was chilled by the sound of a shrill, distant scream."

**The original passage in the novel actually reads:** "The wind roared down the chimney, the rain beat in torrents against the windows, and everything seemed to speak the awfulness of her situation. . . . The storm still raged, and various were the noises, more terrific even than the wind, which struck at intervals on her startled ear. The very curtains of her bed seemed at one moment in motion, and at another the lock of her door was agitated, as if by the attempt of somebody to enter. Hollow murmurs seemed to creep along the gallery, and more than once her blood was chilled by the sound of distant moans." ■

**"We bestow no mean compliment upon the author of *Emma* when we say that keeping close to common incidents, and to such characters as occupy the ordinary walks of life, she has produced sketches of such spirit and originality that we never miss the excitement which depends upon a narrative of uncommon events. . . . In this class she stands almost alone."** Sir Walter Scott, *The Quarterly Review*, 10/1815.

**"The value of the characterisation in *Emma* is great, and the novel is more individual, more in a class by itself, than any of the other books but *Pride and Prejudice*."** O.W. Firkins, *Jane Austen*, 1920.

"Jane Austen's irony is endlessly challenging to those of us who like to grasp just how an author achieves distinctiveness and who then want to tell others what we think we have found. . . . Just as the pleasure for the reader is in entering . . . into what Emma is up to, so there is a further pleasure for this reader in figuring out what Jane Austen is up to." John K. Hale, *The Explicator*, Spring 2001.

"[I]n the novel's extended depiction of Emma's decision to reject Frank, Austen particularly reveals how Emma is enmeshed in her leisure class's everyday work of maintaining proper etiquette. . . . There is a great deal of difference between simply acknowledging that manners matter socially in Austen's portrayals and understanding that the production of etiquette is a primary and defining function of the historical class that she depicts." Jonathan H. Grossman, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 9/1999.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** This comic masterpiece, Austen's most technically brilliant work, shows we can all learn from our mistakes.

**MOVIE:** 1996, Matchmaker Films/Haft Entertainment, directed by Douglas McGrath and starring Gwyneth Paltrow and Jeremy Northam; 1996, A&E, directed by Diarmuid Lawrence and starring Kate Beckinsale and Mark Strong; "Clueless," 1995, Paramount Studio, directed by Amy Heckerling and starring Alicia Silverstone and Paul Rudd.

### Persuasion (1818)

**P**ublished a year after Austen's death, *Persuasion* presents an older, 27-year-old heroine. It also takes place at a specific time (1814–1815), and assumes a mature, rather than playfully romantic, tone. Like her other novels, *Persuasion* deals with embedded social mores and institutions.

**THE STORY:** Many years ago, Anne Elliot allowed a friend to convince her that the love of her life, Captain Wentworth, lacked the proper social standing to court her. When Wentworth returns to their English seaside town, can they acknowledge that mistaken judgments drove them apart and recover their aborted love?

"Miss Austen's work in *Persuasion* may be described as teasing the reader, finding excuse after excuse for withholding from him a satisfaction which she is almost as eager to grant as he to obtain. . . . When this showing in character is combined with the conspicuous feebleness in plot, the secondary place of *Persuasion* in Miss Austen's work is unmistakable." O.W. Firkins, *Jane Austen*, 1920.

"The novels of Jane Austen have been variously interpreted as supporting conservative or feminist views. . . . However, *Persuasion*, her final novel, is a departure from her previous books that offers a wider view of the world."



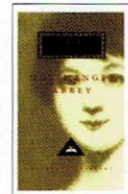
Christopher Clausen, *American Scholar*, Spring 1999.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Written during Austen's fatal illness, a novel of second chances, and perhaps a secondary novel.

**MOVIE:** 1995, BBC Films, directed by Roger Michell and starring Corin Redgrave, John Woodvine, and Fiona Shaw; 1995, Columbia/Tristar Studios, directed by Roger Michell and starring Amanda Root, Ciarán Hinds, and Susan Fleetwood.

### Northanger Abbey (1818)

**A**usten titled the 1798 version of this first novel *Susan*. She sold it to a publisher for £10 in 1803, but purchased the unpublished manuscript back ten years later. Only after her death did her brother Henry have it published. This light-hearted novel parodies the highly emotional Gothic literature of the late 18th century, such as Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*. Much of this novel's humor comes from the contrast between the heroine and her literary heroines.



**THE STORY:** When the earnest young heroine, Catherine Morland, leaves home for a stay in Bath, she encounters "society." Disappointed by a friend, she retreats to her true friend Eleanor Tilney's family estate, Northanger Abbey. There, she meets the charming Henry Tilney and learns to distinguish between the passionate dramas of Gothic fiction and realities of everyday life.

"*Northanger Abbey* (1818) is written quite in the spirit of banter, and the humorous misadventures of the romantically inclined young heroine are shafts capitably aimed against the tasteless romances of the *Udolpho* type. . . ."

William Edward Simonds, *An Introduction to the Study of English Fiction*, 1894.

"*Northanger Abbey* has a motive and a story, but the bearing of the story on the motive is very obscure, and, so far as the obscurity is penetrable, unsatisfactory. . . . [The novel] was prosperous and joyous in its own course; it swerved from that course without adequate reason; and it ceased to prosper and rejoice." O.W. Firkins, *Jane Austen*, 1920.

"The opening of the novel, which establishes Catherine as both the heroine of the book and the antithesis of the traditional heroine, presents us firmly with an ironic distance between the unreal world of popular literature and the 'real' world of Austen's novel. . . . [By parodying] both predominant elements of eighteenth-century fiction, the sensational and the over-sensitive. . . she draws attention to the folly of real people behaving as if in a novel." John Hudson, *The English Review*, 9/2001.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A masterful burlesque and coming-of-age story that pokes fun at the era's overwrought Gothic novels. ■