

# The Regency in Modern Literature

BY LYNN METZGER



Attention to manners, courtship, and social standing—that is the domain of many Regency writers, both those who penned novels in the early 19th century and novelists re-creating the period today. Jane Austen set her romantic domestic dramas among the landed gentry; more than a century later, novelist Georgette Heyer, inspired by Austen, founded the Regency romance subgenre. But far from describing only social relations between the sexes and classes, the literature of the Regency era, then and now, is as diverse as the period itself: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Patrick O'Brian's nautical Aubrey-Maturin series, mysteries, and even fantasies set amid the Napoleonic Wars count themselves among the genre. (We'll include some British perspectives on the Napoleonic Wars here, but save much of this and the French Revolution for a future piece.)

The British Regency, which officially began in 1811, ended with King George III's death in 1820, when the Prince Regent (as the Prince of Wales came to be known) ascended to the throne. Culturally, the Regency, which often refers to the years between 1795 and 1837, represents a shift from the rationalism of the Age of Enlightenment to the romanticism of the Victorians. Despite political upheaval and war, the late 18th and early 19th century ushered in a new era of cultural refinement. The extravagant Prince Regent (later, King George IV) underwrote some of the greatest artistic and architectural achievements of the day, and the arts flourished.

The literature of the Regency era reflects a potent mélange of political, social, and cultural forces. Romantic poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth rejected the stiff intellectualism of the 18th century in favor of emotion, imagination, and a veneration of nature. The novel, long disdained by educated readers for its sentimentality and melodrama, become more respectable, in part because of the success of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), about an English nobleman who finds himself caught in the 1745 Jacobite uprising, and, later,

*Ivanhoe* (1819), in which a knight becomes embroiled in a royal case of sibling rivalry. The gothic novel—for example, *Frankenstein* (1818) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794)—added new levels of horror. Realistic works depicting believable, everyday characters were, in turn, a response to the fantastic elements of gothic fiction. Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778), among others, provided a comic view of wealthy English society while realistically portraying working-class London. Additionally, innovations in printing made books affordable to growing numbers of the lower classes—particularly women—whose preferences began to shape the market.

The Regency era has also become fertile ground for present-day novelists. Unlike other eras—say, the Tudor period, with its colorful focus on Henry VIII (Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* and Margaret George's fictional *The Autobiography of Henry VIII* come to mind)—the Regency has produced perhaps a greater share of modern-day genre books than strict historical fiction. There may be less royal intrigue; perhaps the drama of the Napoleonic Wars grabs the imaginations of writers of military fiction, or the wonder of the era inspires supernatural themes. Because the period lends itself to genre-specific approaches to fiction, we've broken up our coverage of contemporary Regency novels according to genre, starting with works inspired by the grande dame novelist of the comedy of manners, Jane Austen.

## JANE AUSTEN SPIN-OFFS

Jane Austen (1775–1817), the undisputed queen of the Regency novel, remains one of the most influential, best-loved writers in English literature. Her novels, set among the landed gentry, detail the finer points of society—manners, courtship, and marriage—as she observed it, deftly drawing characters, settings, and story lines from life. Although

her novels received scant critical attention when they were published, they were widely admired by readers, including the Prince Regent, for their realistic depictions of human nature, piercing social commentary, and sly sense of humor. Austen and her novels have since exploded in popularity, captivating generations of readers and inspiring sequels, prequels, copycats, adaptations, reinterpretations, movies, miniseries, musicals, and even a cookbook. (For closer readings of Austen's life, we recommend *Jane Austen: A Life* by Claire Tomalin [1997] and *Becoming Jane Austen* by John Spence [2007].)

### **An Assembly Such as This** (2006)

**A Novel of Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman**

By Pamela Aidan



Fitzwilliam Darcy is resigned to the tedium of country society during a stay at the estate of his good friend, Charles Bingley, until he finds himself captivated by the daughter of a local gentleman. The novel reveals Darcy's perspective on the happenings in *Pride and Prejudice*; the trilogy continues with *Duty and Desire* (2006) and *These Three Remain* (2007).

### **Jane Fairfax** (1991)

**The Secret Story of the Second Heroine of Jane Austen's Emma**

By Joan Aiken



Jane Fairfax, orphaned at an early age, is raised by her respectable but impoverished aunt and grandmother and educated in London before returning to Highbury, where her destiny intertwines with that of Austen's beloved Emma.

### **Pride and Prejudice and Zombies** (2009)

By Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith

In this surprising *New York Times* best seller, Elizabeth Bennet and her sisters are martial arts experts specially trained to defend themselves against the "sorry stricken" who roam the English countryside. (★★★★ July/Aug 2009)

### **None But You** (2007)

**Frederick Wentworth, Captain, Book 1**

By Susan Kaye



Another of Austen's tales reinterpreted from the hero's point of view, *None But You* follows Captain Wentworth (from *Persuasion*) as he struggles with his feelings for the woman, Anne Elliot, who rejected him eight years earlier. The story continues with *For You Alone* (2008).

### **Further Reading**

**PRIDE AND PRESCIENCE: OR, A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED** | CARRIE BEBRIS (2004)

**MERCY'S EMBRACE: ELIZABETH ELLIOT'S STORY** | LAURA HILE (2009)

**THE PHANTOM OF PEMBERLEY: A PRIDE AND PREJUDICE MURDER MYSTERY** | REGINA JEFFERS (2010) (SEE BELOW, IN REGENCY MYSTERIES)

**ONLY MR. DARCY WILL DO** | KARA LOUISE (2011)

**JANE AUSTEN MADE ME DO IT: ORIGINAL STORIES INSPIRED BY LITERATURE'S MOST ASTUTE OBSERVER OF THE HUMAN HEART** | LAUREL ANN NATTRESS, ED. (2011)

## *REGENCY ROMANCE*

While Jane Austen's books often depict misunderstandings between would-be lovers, other novels written during the Regency, including Susan Ferrier's *Marriage* (1818), Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791), Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801), and Frances Burney's *Camilla* (1796), also focus on relations between men and women of marriageable age. Rich with amorous intrigue, the era has produced an entire crop of contemporary novels that emulate the Regency's romantic fiction and mine its graceful manners, rigid social codes, and fashions and customs of the aristocracy. Considered a subgenre of the romance or historical novel, Regency romances vary in their depiction of sensuality (some take a notably risqué approach to the era) and have weathered variations in popularity.

Some of the most popular, and lasting, historical Regency romance novels are by authors who follow in Austen's footsteps—notably Georgette Heyer, whose *Regency Buck* (1935) launched the Regency romance subgenre. Although many have followed the master Heyer's lead, few have been able to duplicate her delightful characters, riveting plots, and copious historical detail on the Regency's upper classes. (For a guide to her upper-class Regency realm, see Jennifer Kloester's *Georgette Heyer's Regency World* [2008].)

### **The Grand Sophy** (1950)

By Georgette Heyer



When her father is temporarily dispatched to South America, the spirited, meddling Sophy Stanton-Lacy moves in with her aunt, Lady Ombersley, and her cousins and soon turns the house upside down.

### **Mr. Malcolm's List** (2009)

By Suzanne Allain



In this romantic comedy, young friends hatch a plan to punish the extremely eligible but overly fussy Mr. Malcolm (reminiscent, according to some critics, of Austen's Mr. Darcy) for spurning one by enticing him to fall in love with the other.

### **Emily Goes to Exeter** (1990)

**A Novel of Regency England, Being the First Volume of the Traveling Matchmaker**

By Marion Chesney

A legacy from her late employer allows Miss Hannah Pym to retire from housekeeping and realize her dream of seeing



the world. When she and her fellow travelers find themselves snowbound in a country inn, she decides to occupy herself with a bit of matchmaking. The series continues with *Belinda Goes to Bath* (1991).

### **An Accomplished Woman** (2009)

By Jude Morgan

Lydia Templeton, a confirmed and contented spinster, reluctantly agrees to accompany her grandmother's young ward to Bath to find her a suitable husband. Of course, nothing goes according to plan.

### **Further Reading**

**COTILLION** | GEORGETTE HEYER (1953)

**FREDERICA** | GEORGETTE HEYER (1965)

**INDISCRETION** | JUDE MORGAN (2006)

**A LITTLE FOLLY** | JUDE MORGAN (2010)

## MILITARY FICTION

The Regency period includes the later French revolutionary wars, the Napoleonic Wars, and the struggle for Scottish independence—captivating events for writers at the time. Captain Frederick Marryat's *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (1829), written by a British naval hero who served during the Na-

poleonic Wars, follows the escapades of Jack Easy, a young midshipman who soon runs afoul of his superiors. Jane Porter's *The Scottish Chiefs* (1810) fictionalizes the lives of Scottish national heroes William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, men willing to risk everything for their homeland. (If you think you know this story because you've seen *Braveheart*, think again.) But the battles, heroes, and struggles of the era have also engaged more contemporary writers.

English novelist C. S. Forester kicked off modern-day readers' love affair with the Napoleonic Wars in 1937 when he published *The Happy Return*, which introduced Horatio Hornblower, a junior captain in the Royal Navy on a secret mission to South America in 1808. His 11-book series, including five prequels written in the 1950s and 1960s, tracks Hornblower's rise from an inexperienced, self-doubting, often seasick midshipman to a capable and confident leader during the early years of the 19th century.

Forester's novels, in turn, inspired Bernard Cornwell and Patrick O'Brian. The English Cornwell, a fan of the Hornblower novels as a child, was surprised to learn that no one had yet fictionalized the Napoleonic battles fought on land. Years later, he created English rifleman Richard Sharpe, a courageous and skilled officer with a tender spot for the ladies. Cornwell began the series with *Sharpe's Eagle* (1981), set during the Napoleonic Wars, but he later wrote a set of prequels describing Sharpe's earlier adventures in India, eventually publishing 22 novels in all. Cornwell's deftly drawn battle scenes, breathtaking plots, and likable characters have attracted considerable praise and a strong following.

Award-winning English novelist Patrick O'Brian is best known for his meticulously researched and highly detailed Aubrey-Maturin series, which follows the friendship between Royal Navy Captain Jack Aubrey and Irish-Catalan physician Stephen Maturin, who joins Aubrey's crew as the ship's surgeon. Based on the historical feats of real-life naval hero Lord Cochrane, O'Brian's novels incorporate actual events into their plots and use the nautical terminology of the period to create an accurate portrayal of early 19th-century life. His evocative prose, astute character development, subtle humor, and action-filled plots won him considerable international acclaim, and the majority of his novels reached the *New York Times* best seller list. A 2003 film, *Master and Commander*, starring Russell Crowe and Paul Bettany, was based loosely on the events covered in several Aubrey-Maturin novels.

### **Mr. Midshipman Hornblower** (1950)

By C. S. Forester



Horatio Hornblower has just joined the crew of the *HMS Justinian* as a harried, low-ranking officer when Great Britain declares war on France. The series continues with *Lieutenant Hornblower* (1952).

## GENERAL NONFICTION ON THE REGENCY ERA

### **Prince of Pleasure** (1999)

**The Prince of Wales and the Making of the Regency**

By Saul David

This penetrating biography of the man who would be king reveals how the prince's larger-than-life personality and lifestyle shaped the politics and culture of the era.

### **Our Tempestuous Day** (1986)

**A History of Regency England**

By Carolly Erickson

The acclaimed Tudor biographer creates a vibrant and entertaining portrait of this turbulent time.

### **What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew** (1993)

**From Fox Hunting to Whist—the Facts of Daily Life in Nineteenth Century England**

By Daniel Pool

If you love the English classics but struggle with the difference between a barouche and a curricle, then this engaging and unusually informative book is for you. (Hint: They are both types of carriages.)

## Sharpe's Eagle (1981)

By Bernard Cornwell



In July 1809, Lieutenant Richard Sharpe and his riflemen prepare for battle with the French and, at the same time, confront misconduct and dishonor within their ranks. The series continues with *Sharpe's Gold* (1981). First in the series (a prequel): *Sharpe's Tiger* (1997).

## Master and Commander (1969)

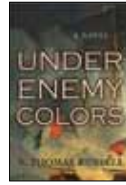
By Patrick O'Brian



In the spring of 1800, recently promoted Royal Navy Commander Jack Aubrey is given command of an aging brig, the *HMS Sophie*, and is assigned to escort a convoy of merchant ships into treacherous waters. The series continues with *Post Captain* (1972).

## Under Enemy Colors (2007)

By S. Thomas Russell



On the eve of war with revolutionary France, Royal Navy officer Charles Hayden takes a position as first lieutenant aboard the *HMS Themis*, where he soon finds himself caught between a tyrannical captain and a rebellious crew. The series by this Canadian author continues with *A Battle Won* (2010).

### Further Reading

**RAMAGE** | DUDLEY POPE (1965)

**BY THE MAST DIVIDED** | DAVID DONACHIE (2004)

**THE COMPLETE MIDSHIPMAN BOLITHO** | ALEXANDER KENT (2006)

**KYDD** | JULIAN STOCKWIN (2001)

**THE BLIGHTED CLIFFS: BOOK ONE OF THE RELUCTANT ADVENTURES OF LIEUTENANT MARTIN JERROLD** | EDWIN THOMAS (2004)

**SAILS ON THE HORIZON: A NOVEL OF THE NAPOLEONIC WARS** | JAY WORRALL (2005)

**AN INFAMOUS ARMY: A NOVEL OF WELLINGTON, WATERLOO, LOVE AND WAR** | GEORGETTE HEYER (1998)

**LOSING NELSON** | BARRY UNSWORTH (1999)

## REGENCY FOR YOUNGER READERS

### Sorcery and Cecelia or The Enchanted Chocolate Pot (1988)

By Patricia Wrede and Caroline Stevermer

Jane Austen meets J. K. Rowling in this delightful young adult fantasy featuring two young cousins, witches, wizards, a would-be murderer, and a mysterious marquis in search of a very special chocolate pot. The series continues with *The Grand Tour* (2004). Ages 12 and up.

### Mairelon the Magician (1991)

By Patricia Wrede

In an alternate Regency England, a young girl survives the streets of London by disguising herself as a boy. Enter magic, wizards, and disguised noblemen—it all makes for a delightful period fantasy. Ages 10 and up.

### Napoleon's Pyramids (2007)

By William Dietrich

Billed as both a young adult and adult novel, *Napoleon's Pyramids* features the American gambler Ethan Gage, who, living in Paris at the end of the French Revolution, finds himself in possession of an ancient gold medallion—and a participant in Napoleon's ill-fated Egyptian campaign.

### The Season (2009)

By Sarah MacLean

A Regency bodice ripper, geared toward a younger set. Ages 12 and up.

## REGENCY MYSTERIES

Historical mysteries allow readers to be transported to different times and eras to solve a mystery or two; Regency mysteries use the period's setting to craft satisfying whodunit plots without the benefit of modern-day forensics. The mysteries set during the Regency (many are series) often borrow from the conventions of Jane Austen or use her life or her characters to create strong characters and imaginative historical mystery novels.

### Jane and the Unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor (1996)

Being the First Jane Austen Mystery

By Stephanie Barron



When her dear friend the Countess of Scargrave is accused of murdering her husband, Jane (Austen, of course) embarks on her own investigation—one that could put her in terrible danger. The series continues with *Jane and the Man of the Cloth* (1997).

### The Phantom of Pemberley (2010)

By Regina Jeffers



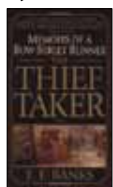
Written in Jane Austen's playful, witty style, this sequel to *Pride and Prejudice* follows Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet—now a husband-and-wife sleuth team—as they attempt to solve a series of mysterious deaths plaguing the manor at Pemberley.



## The Thief Taker (2002)

Memoirs of a Bow Street Runner

By T. F. Banks



Hired by Miss Louisa Hamilton to inquire into the suspicious death of her fiancé, Bow Street Constable Henry Morton stumbles into a web of fraud and corruption that puts his own life at risk. The series continues with *The Emperor's Assassin* (2003).

## What Angels Fear (2005)

A Sebastian St. Cyr Mystery, Book 1

By C. S. Harris

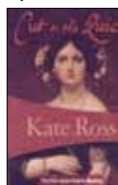


Sebastian St. Cyr, Viscount Devlin, is accused of the rape and murder of a beautiful actress, but he escapes from the constables sent to arrest him and sets out to uncover the true killer and clear his name. The series continues with *When Gods Die* (2006).

## Cut to the Quick (1994)

Julian Kestrel #1 (A Felony & Mayhem Mystery)

By Kate Ross



When a new acquaintance invites refined Regency dandy Julian Kestrel to a country house party, Julian accepts, but old grudges, family secrets, and a murder cast a dark shadow over the festivities. The series continues with *The Broken Vessel* (1995).

## Further Reading

THE KEEPER OF SECRETS | JUDITH CUTLER (2008)

BELLFIELD HALL: OR, THE OBSERVATIONS OF MISS DIDO KENT | ANNA DEAN (2010)

THE HANOVER SQUARE AFFAIR | ASHLEY GARDNER (2003)

SECRETS OF A LADY | TRACY GRANT (2007)

AN UNPARDONABLE CRIME | ANDREW TAYLOR (2004)

THE DECEPTION AT LYME: OR, THE PERIL OF PERSUASION (MR. AND MRS. DARCY MYSTERIES) | CARRIE BEBRIS (2011)

MURDER AT MANSFIELD PARK | LYNN SHEPHERD (2010)

THE BLACKSTONE KEY | ROSE MELIKAN (2008)

# FANTASY, SCIENCE FICTION, ALTERNATIVE HISTORY

Although one may not initially think of the Regency era as ripe for fantasy, science fiction, and alternative history spin-offs, it has spawned its share of each, though the field remains relatively small.

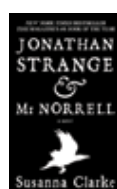
Most of the novels below have no singular inspiration; they draw from varied influences in fantasy, military history,

and science fiction rather than a single work or author (Jane Austen, of course, remains ever present). Yet it is worth highlighting the notorious tale of Frankenstein. Taking on mythic proportions in both modern-day literature and film and forming the template for many mad scientists, *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) was perhaps the finest gothic and horror novel to come out of the Regency era. Written by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797–1851), it tells the tale of a brash, young medical student who unlocks the secret of life. Other of Shelley's books are equally dark in tone and possess unusual, sometimes scandalous, subject matter: in her apocalyptic *The Last Man* (1826), a young man comes of age as a virulent plague threatens humankind in the last years of the 21st century. Prescient? Perhaps. (For a definitive biography of Shelley, see *The Monsters: Mary Shelley and the Curse of Frankenstein* by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler [2006].)

## Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell (2004)

By Susanna Clarke

★ HUGO AWARD



A powerful English magician and his student join forces in the battle against Napoleon and then clash over the younger man's increasing fascination with darker, more dangerous forms of magic. (★★★★ SELECTION Nov/Dec 2004)

## His Majesty's Dragon (2006)

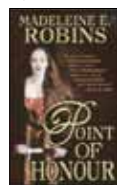
By Naomi Novik



In this alternate history of the Napoleonic Wars, which was nominated for a Hugo Award, Captain Will Laurence of the Royal Navy is transferred to the Aerial Corps and begins battle training with his dragon, Temeraire (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2006). The series continues with *Throne of Jade* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2006).

## Point of Honour (2003)

By Madeleine E. Robins



Disowned by her aristocratic family after eloping with a fencing instructor, Sarah Tolerance becomes a private investigator in an alternate Regency England. The series continues with *Petty Treason* (2004).

## Further Reading

A CIVIL CAMPAIGN | LOIS MCMASTER BUJOLD (1999)

JANE AND THE DAMNED | JANET MULLANY (2010)

SHADES OF MILK AND HONEY | MARY ROBINETTE KOWAL (2010)

SWORDSPOINT | ELLEN KUSHNER (1987)

BORNE IN BLOOD: A NOVEL OF THE COUNT SAINT-GERMAINE | CHELSEA QUINN YARBRO (2007) ■