



The
Jane Austen
Pocket Bible

—
EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT JANE AND HER NOVELS
—

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'A woman, especially if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can':

Influences and literary context

Why did Jane Austen never publish her novels under her own name? And why did she feel the need to launch a defense of her chosen form in *Northanger Abbey*, a story which in itself mocks the popular Gothic form? This chapter takes you through the literary context Jane Austen was writing in, looking at the writers who influenced her, the styles of writing which were prevalent at the time, and the place of women writers.

◆ THE RISE OF THE NOVEL ◆

The novel was a relatively new style of writing which was growing in popularity, though not in reputation, during Jane's lifetime. The novel had grown from the medieval romances of the 12th century (such as Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*) and consisted of a few key elements:

- Novels were prose works, longer in length than poetry or drama.
- They contained realistic characters who led real lives.
- They were intended to teach the reader a moral lesson through the experiences of the characters.

The novel genre saw a surge in popularity as a result of a combination of events:

- Cheaper printing technology meant longer works could be printed in higher volumes.
- There was a rise in literacy levels throughout society.
- The move away from manual labor meant people, especially women, of the middle and upper classes had more free time.
- The rise of the circulating library (a service like a public library where readers could order and access books, see p. 51 for more) meant that people who couldn't afford to buy books were still able to read and enjoy novels.

Although the novel grew rapidly in popularity, the form wasn't respected by intellectuals and the upper classes, and was deemed the cheap entertainment of the masses. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the leading poets of the day, claimed that, 'where the reading of novels prevails as a habit, it occasions in time the entire destruction of the powers of the mind'. It was put forth that the novel could never rival the high-brow content of more established forms such as poetry, history or drama, and the form certainly wasn't helped by the rise of the Gothic novel (see p. 52) or by the rise of women writers (see p. 54).

In Her Own Words 🗨️

'Our family are great Novel-readers and not ashamed of being so.' (Letter to Cassandra, 1798)

However, Austen (as a female author and a fan of novels) defends her chosen form of writing and makes sure to parody those more respected forms of writing, or those novel forms that diminish the reputation of the genre.

Here are just a few examples of the forms Austen mocks:

- **Histories.** Jane's early work *The History of England* was a parody of Oliver Goldsmith's work of the same name.

- **Novels of sensibility.** The overly sensitive and emotional character of Marianne Dashwood is Jane's satire of the sentimental and moralistic works which grew out of the Age of Sensibility.
- **Conduct guides.** Austen mocks the conduct guides that attempted to educate young women on proper behavior, such as Fordyce and Gregory, by presenting female heroines who consistently break with convention, and are usually rewarded for doing so by winning the attentions of their future husbands (see p. 26).

In Her Own Words 📖

In discussing novels Jane said, 'If a book is well written, I always find it too short'.

📖 WHO INSPIRED JANE AUSTEN? 📖

While a lot of Austen's work parodies and mocks the popular forms of her day, she is also careful to praise and emulate the forms she respects and likes. Here are Jane's favorite authors and forms, and the influence they had on her work:

- **Shakespeare.** Jane was a fan of Shakespeare and her family would often read his plays aloud in the evenings. We can see the influence of Shakespeare on Jane's work in her dramatic representation of events, and the amount of dialogue she uses. Jane also mentions Shakespeare explicitly in *Mansfield Park* when Fanny is impressed by Henry's reading of *Henry VIII*.
- **Dr Johnson.** Jane fought against the sentimental notions of the Age of Sensibility and instead followed the model espoused by Samuel Johnson, emphasizing the importance of self knowledge and reason. Austen's sensible and reasonable characters, such as Elinor Dashwood and Anne Elliot, are aware of their own character and so can behave properly and admirably in any situation.
- **Samuel Richardson.** Richardson's novel *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* was one of Jane's favorites as a child, and this,

along with some of his other works, prompted Jane to emulate his style, first by writing *First Impressions* and *Elinor and Marianne* in epistolary form, and even attempting a play called *Sir Charles Grandison or the happy man*. Although Jane also follows the model of Richardson's 1740 novel *Pamela* in all of her own novels, she doesn't use the extreme situations Richardson portrays to evoke sympathy, instead presenting her heroines in everyday situations, and gaining sympathy from her readers from the relatable nature of their experiences.

- **Laurence Sterne.** Another author of sentimental prose whom Austen admired.
- **William Cowper.** Jane was a big fan of Cowper's poetry, such as *The Task*, and she mentions his poetry in *Persuasion* and *Sense and Sensibility*.

📖 THE CIRCULATING LIBRARY 📖 AND FEMALE READERS

The rise of the novel was helped significantly by the rise in both female readers and the related rise of the circulating library, which allowed these women access to novels. The circulating library (a service a bit like a public library where readers paid a fee to access books) became widely popular in the 18th century, with almost 1,000 established in England by 1801. These libraries allowed readers to subscribe for a fee and borrow a specific number of books at a time, depending on the fee paid. This access to books meant that novels became popular at a time when most people couldn't afford to buy books. Novels were an easy pleasure, a book read once and forgotten. Therefore people were more willing to rent novels than buy them, as Austen herself observed, 'People are more ready to borrow and praise, than to buy – which I cannot wonder at'. Most first editions of novels published found themselves in circulating libraries, and most of the stock of these libraries was made up of fiction.

For women, who had very little disposable income of their own, circulating libraries offered access to the growing number of novels that were being manufactured for this contingent audience of

women readers. Austen's description in *Mansfield Park* of Fanny joining the circulating library shows how the circulating library became a new found means of intellectual freedom for women: 'She became a subscriber . . . to be a renter, a chuser of books! And to be having any one's improvement in view of her choice!' As circulating libraries made novels widely available they became subject to the same prejudice and scorn faced by the novels themselves. The fact that women were getting increased access to the forms which were deemed unworthy for reading, meant that the reputation of the novel, and the type of women who read them, fell lower still.

Pocket Fact

In an experiment carried out by the director of the Jane Austen festival, several chapters of Pride and Prejudice, Northanger Abbey and Persuasion were submitted to various publishers under the name 'Alison Laydee' (a play on Austen's pseudonym 'A Lady') with only minor alterations and the original titles Austen had given them. All of the submissions were rejected. It seems that Jane Austen may have struggled to find a publisher in today's market as well!

THE GOTHIC NOVEL

The rise of the Gothic novel in the 18th century began with Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), which combined Gothic settings with thrilling horror and supernatural events. The arising genre combined themes of horror and romance in a way calculated to evoke a sense of pleasing terror. Walpole's work contained elements of melodrama, and a prevalence of emotion and atmosphere which reflected a rejection of the Enlightenment ideals. This new genre came about during a revival in Gothic architecture, which saw the literature evoke the very crumbling, ancient buildings they were set in. Gothic fiction often contained elements of the supernatural, terrible family secrets, and female victims locked up by evil tyrants in castles.

In the 1740s Samuel Richardson's and Henry Fielding's novels and their 'literary realism' had made the genre acceptable, but the

supernatural elements of Gothic fiction relegated the form back into populist trash. In the 1790s Ann Radcliffe managed to rescue the reputation of the Gothic novel, by explaining the supernatural. Her novels, full of natural causes for seemingly supernatural events, experienced by morally superior heroines, began to make the Gothic form acceptable. However Radcliffe's success had an unforeseen consequence in that the market became flooded with cheap, low quality imitations, meaning the inferior reputation of Gothic fiction remained.

Pocket Fact

Richard Sheridan, author of The Rivals, which Jane had performed at Steventon as a child, described Pride and Prejudice as 'one of the cleverest things' he had ever read.

The outlandish stereotypical elements of Gothic fiction meant that its characters and plots were perfect for parody and satire. This was exactly Austen's intent in writing *Northanger Abbey*. Her heroine Catherine Morland portrays the danger of being carried away by the emotional melodrama of Gothic fiction, as her imagination runs away with her while she is staying at the Abbey. In her novel Austen mentions some of the most famous Gothic novels of the day, including:

- *The Monk* by M G Lewis
- *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe
- *The Italian*, also by Ann Radcliffe

Her mocking of the Gothic form shows that while Austen is a champion for the novel form, she does not want to be associated with the low reputation of the Gothic. Jane does use her parody to launch a defense of the novel form, as seen in her authorial aside, when describing Catherine and Isabella's reading:

'Yes, novels; – for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel-writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding – joining with their greatest

enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas! if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? I cannot approve of it.'

✿ FEMALE WRITERS ✿

While the novel genre, aimed mainly at female readers, was on the rise, this period also saw a rise in the opportunities for women writers. The female novelists who became popular at this time created both a market and an audience for Jane Austen. Many of these contemporary novelists were better known than Austen (who published anonymously) but this meant that they faced the sullied reputation of being a female author.

Society deemed it unladylike for women to pursue fame and a profitable career, meaning many female writers, including Austen herself, decided to publish their novels anonymously to avoid the slander that could accompany their name. Many women were discouraged from writing by their husbands and families. Jane was lucky in this respect as her father encouraged her writing and even approached a publisher for her when she was 22. Jane's brother also acted as her representative at her publisher when her novels did get published.

Although there was a stigma attached to being a female author, during this time it was relatively easy to be published. Writers had four main options to get their work into print:

- **Publishing by subscription.** This method meant that people would sign up to receive a proposed novel. Once enough subscriptions had been received a novel would be put into print and sent out to the subscribers.
- **Publishing by profit sharing.** This meant that the publisher paid for the publication of a novel but the author only received a fee once the book had made a profit. If a book didn't sell well enough to make a profit the author got nothing.

- **Publishing by selling the copyright.** Most new authors chose this method, selling their copyright for a small fee in return for having their work published. This was a gamble; if the novel did well they only received their initial fee but it removed the risk of a failure.
- **Publishing on commission.** This method meant that an author paid all the costs for the publication of a book, and the publisher acted as the distributor. The publisher would also take a 10% fee from the profits of the book. If the book made a loss the author would have to pay for this. This is the option which Jane herself chose.

So while being a female author could attract a poor reputation, the growing opportunities for publication, along with the growth of a female audience meant that female authors began to be a firm presence in the market. It was this market that Jane was determined to be a part of, trying all her life to get her work published. This was a goal she finally achieved at the age of 34.

FEMALE NOVELISTS WHO INSPIRED AUSTEN

- **Frances Burney.** Burney was the author of *Cecilia*, *Camilla* and *Evelina*. These novels all showed young women interacting with family and friends in real circumstances. Jane read these comedies of manners in her youth and their heavy influence on her novels is clear to see.

Packet Fact

Jane subscribed to Burney's novel *Cecilia* when she was 20. The phrase 'Pride and Prejudice' appears in this novel several times so it's probable that this is where Jane found the title of her novel.

- **Mary Wollstonecraft.** Wollstonecraft was an active advocate of women's rights at this time. She wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792 and also criticized Dr James Fordyce's conduct guides for demeaning women. She claimed that women were rational creatures ruined by the patriarchal system.

The character of Mrs Croft in *Persuasion* espouses exactly this sentiment.

- **Ann Radcliffe.** Mrs Radcliffe's novels were responsible for the validation of the Gothic novel and she gained fame as the author of popular works such as *The Castle of Udolpho*. She published under her own name, Mrs Radcliffe, but her marital status meant that her husband received all of her profits and copyright fees.
- **Maria Edgeworth.** Edgeworth wrote several novels as well as children's literature, and was respected by male contemporaries such as Walter Scott. Edgeworth was interested in the issue of education and put forward the argument that children should be allowed to be free to make mistakes and learn from them. We can see the influence of this thinking in Austen's work when we consider that all of Jane's heroines go through this kind of learning process.

✿ AUSTEN'S RECEPTION ✿

At the time of their publication Jane's novels were considered fashionable and drew admiration from Princess Charlotte, the daughter of the Prince Regent, and the Prince Regent himself. Austen did have some relative success with some of her novels immediately following their publication, while others didn't sell as well:

- *Pride and Prejudice* was her most popular novel, selling out its first edition of 1,000 copies in less than two years.
- The first edition of *Sense and Sensibility* sold out in 1813, after being published in 1811.
- The first edition of *Mansfield Park* sold out in just six months – however the second edition did very badly, meaning that Jane lost a lot of money.
- *Emma* sold 1,248 copies in nine months, but only increased to a mere 1,437 after four years.
- The combined edition of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* sold 1,409 copies within a year.

Although Jane's novels were popular she didn't make very much money from them, mainly as a result of publishing on commission. Between 1811 and 1817 she made just £630 (about \$32,130 now); not a sufficient income for a gentry lady to live on. As a comparison, consider that Jane's dress allowance for one year was £20 (\$1,020), and that she had the lowest allowance of her entire family.

GETTING REVIEWED

Sense and Sensibility and *Pride and Prejudice* did receive reviews in some of the journals of the day, such as the *British Critic* and *The Critical Review*. Most of these reviews were short and didn't go into much detail, but they were favorable. Jane's most important review came from Sir Walter Scott when he reviewed *Emma* for *The Quarterly Review*. He used Austen's novel as part of a larger defense of the novel form, and praised her work for its realism. In 1821 Jane received further praise from Whatley, a critic who compared her work with that of Shakespeare and Homer.

JANE'S ENDURING REPUTATION

Going into the Victorian era, Jane's novels lost some of their popularity as they didn't fit the mold expected of a Victorian novel. While the works of writers like Dickens became popular, Austen's work lost its appeal, meaning that there were no new editions printed of her work, although her novels never went out of print.

In 1869 James Edward Austen-Leigh published his *Memoir of Jane Austen*. This work sparked an interest in Jane and her novels saw a rise in new editions, with the first popular and collected editions of her work appearing in 1883.

✿ Pocket Fact ✿

Although Austen's popularity did fall off slightly during the Victorian age, her novels were translated and published abroad soon after their initial publication. All six of her novels had been published in France by the middle of the 1820s.

This new popularity was scorned by literary critics who wanted to distinguish their appreciation of Austen's work from that of the masses. They coined the term 'Janeite' to describe themselves and this movement saw the beginning of literary criticism of Jane Austen. In 1911 the Oxford scholar Bradley published an essay on Austen's work, marking a new academic appreciation for her novels. In 1923 the first scholarly edition of Austen's novels was published, making it the first scholarly edition of any English writer. Austen's work has seen a continuous growth in its academic reputation since this point.

MODERN INTERPRETATIONS OF JANE AUSTEN

If you type 'Jane Austen' into Amazon you will be met with pages of different editions of Jane's novels. You will also be met by a wide range of modern novels inspired by Jane and her characters. By the year 2000 it was estimated that there were over 100 printed adaptations of her work, ranging from sequels to erotica to horror stories. Most of the spin-offs inspired by Austen's novels stem from *Pride and Prejudice*, and here are just a few notable examples:

- *Pride and Prejudice Continues* (a series of books)
- *Fitzwilliam Darcy, gentleman* (a series of books)
- *Mr Darcy Takes a Wife*
- *The Pemberley Variations*
- *Letters from Pemberley*

Pocket Fact

In 2010 a signed edition of *Emma* sold for £325,000 (approx. \$522,000) at an auction in England. The novel is signed with a dedication to Jane's friend Anne Sharp, who was governess to Jane's niece Fanny.

Jane Austen herself has also inspired a number of modern novels, such as:

- *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict*
- *Talking about Jane Austen in Baghdad*
- *The Jane Austen Book Club*
- *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen*
- *A Walk with Jane Austen*

Horror and Jane Austen

Although Jane was praised for her accurate portrayal of real people living through plausible circumstances, in recent years there has been a rapid growth in the number of horror stories inspired by her work. These titles include:

- *Mr Darcy, Vampire*
- *Jane bites back*
- *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*
- *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*
- *Emma and the Werewolves*
- *Persuasion . . . in Space!*

It has also been announced that Elton John's film company is making a film called *Pride and Predator: the story of what happens when aliens invade Longbourn*. These adaptations play upon the juxtaposition of Austen's propriety and the lurid pulp quality of some horror archetypes. It seems that the realism of Jane Austen's work is the perfect foil for the outlandish premises of camp horror – a match made in heaven!