

EDITED BY  
SUSANNAH CARSON

A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY  
ACKNOWLEDGED

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33 GREAT WRITERS  
ON WHY WE READ

*Jane Austen*

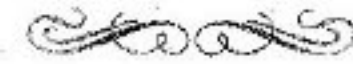
“Contains almost as  
many gems as  
the novels encompass.”  
—THE MIAMI HERALD

FOREWORD BY HAROLD BLOOM



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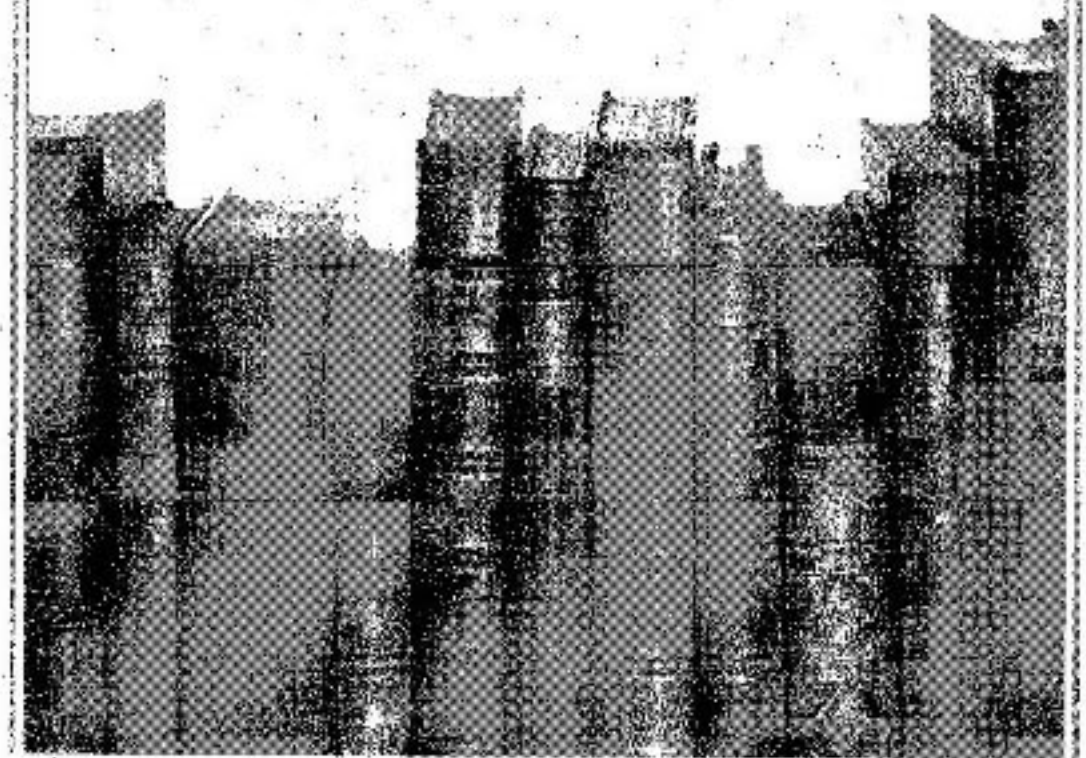


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**Susannah Carson**

FOREWORD BY

**Harold Bloom**



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## Foreword

HAROLD BLOOM

Some literary works are mortal; Jane Austen's are immortal. What makes this so? Austen's work possesses an uncanniness, a certain mode of originality. She created personality, character, and cognition; she brought into being new modes of consciousness. Like Shakespeare, Austen invented us. Because we are Austen's children, we behold and confront our own anguish and our own fantasies in her novels. She seems to explain us for the simple reason that she contributed to our invention. Personality is Austen's greatest originality and the cause of her perpetual pervasiveness.

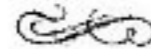
The precision and accuracy of Austen's representation is Shakespearean. The influence of the heroines of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, Rosalind of *As You Like It* in particular, is palpable upon Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* and Emma Woodhouse of the equally superb novel she entitles. After Shakespeare, no writer in the language does so well as Austen in giving us figures, central and peripheral, utterly consistent each in her (or his) own mode of speech and consciousness, and intensely different from each other.

The strong selves of Austen's heroines are wrought with a fine individuality that attests to her reserves of power. Had she not died so soon, she would have been capable of creating a Shakespearean diversity of persons, despite her narrowly, deliberately limited social range of representation. She had learned Shakespeare's most difficult lesson: to manifest sympathy toward all of her characters, even the least admirable, while detaching herself even from her favorite, Emma.

Austen is a profound ironist who employs her irony to refine aspects



## Anna Quindlen



### PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND THE MYSTERIES OF LIFE

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." So begins one of the finest novels written in the English language, *Pride and Prejudice*. Yet it was published anonymously, its author described on the title page only as "a lady." The writing of novels was a disreputable profession in the early part of the nineteenth century; when her family composed the inscription for her tomb in Winchester Cathedral shortly after her death in 1817, Jane Austen was described as daughter, as Christian, but not as writer. In a memoir of his aunt, J. E. Austen-Leigh wrote of the verger at the cathedral who asked a visitor to the grave, "Pray, sir, can you tell me whether there was anything particular about that lady; so many people want to know where she was buried."

She wrote not of war and peace, but of men, money, and marriage, the battlefield for women of her day and, surely, of our own. She set both theme and tone in that tartly aphoristic first sentence. This is a world in which personal relationships are based more often on gain than on love and respect. It is the world of the five Bennet sisters, growing up in the English countryside as the eighteenth century gives way to the nineteenth, who must find husbands if they are to make their way in the world. And it is about the dance of attraction between two brilliant, handsome human beings who teach each other, through trial and considerable error, the folly of their greatest faults.

But *Pride and Prejudice* is also about that thing that all great novels consider, the search for self. And it is the first great novel to teach us that that

search is as surely undertaken in the drawing room making small talk as in the pursuit of a great white whale or the public punishment of adultery. "And Jane Austen," Somerset Maugham once wrote, "the daughter of a rather dull and perfectly respectable father, a clergyman, and a rather silly mother. How did she come to write *Pride and Prejudice*? The whole thing is a mystery." Maugham misses the point. What was true of Austen is true of many other women throughout history; she was educated in human nature by her friends, family, and neighbors, and it was to that circle of polite society that she turned in her fiction. She is the standard-bearer for what we now sometimes, condescendingly, call domestic drama, a writer who believed the clash of personalities was as meaningful as—perhaps more meaningful than—the clash of sabers. For those of us who suspect that all the mysteries of life are contained in the microcosm of the family, that personal relationships prefigure all else, the work of Jane Austen is the Rosetta stone of literature. We can only hope that when she described her first novel as "rather too light and bright," she was being ironic rather than self-deprecating.

Serious literary discussions of *Pride and Prejudice* threaten to obscure the most important thing about it: it is a pure joy to read. Part of that is because its central character is so alive, so riveting, so much one of us, only better. Elizabeth Bennet is a witty and jaded observer of her milieu, wise enough to decline a marriage offer from a man she finds odious but foolish enough to be taken in temporarily by a seductive scoundrel. Although she is contemptuous of the ways of the world in which she lives, a world in which accomplishment for a woman means being able to "paint tables, cover screens and net purses," she is reconciled to conforming to those ways. She is capable of pleading with one man who believes her refusal of his proposal must be a female ploy: "Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart." And she is just as capable of concluding without much regret, when another with whom she has had a flirtation moves on, "The sudden acquisition of ten thousand pounds was the most remarkable charm of the young lady to whom he was now rendering himself agreeable." At once cynical and idealistic, she is finally terribly real.

The action of the novel revolves around Elizabeth and her sister, the sweet-tempered Jane, sugar to Elizabeth's lemonade. (This polar approach to the female character will appear later in nineteenth-century English literature, more broadly and unforgivingly drawn, in Dorothea



Casaubon and Celia Brooke of *Middlemarch*.) Jane falls in love with a well-to-do young man named Bingley, while Elizabeth takes an instant dislike to Bingley's closest friend, the wealthy Fitzwilliam Darcy. For much of the book these two spar verbally, contentiously, delightfully; as Elizabeth says, "We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with the eclat of a proverb."

The tale that follows is, as John Halperin writes in his biography of Austen, "about true and false moral values" in a society that sometimes seems to find value only in great fortune and high position. Darcy learns to trust his heart and mute his arrogance, Elizabeth not to make hasty judgments: hence the pride and the prejudice of the title. (Austen originally named the book *First Impressions*; thank God for second thoughts!) The novel explores matches of uncomplicated attraction, deadening practicality, and frivolous concupiscence. And it is filled with minor characters as broad, ridiculous, and entertaining as any in Dickens: the haughty Lady Catherine de Bourgh, the pompous Mr. Collins, and Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, the oddest and most ill-matched of parents. The breeding of the well-bred is revealed as every bit as bad as that of the low-born, and the judgment of the intelligent as sometimes stupid indeed. The assessment of human nature is acute, unforgiving, even cruel. "You could not shock her more than she shocks me; / Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass," wrote the poet W. H. Auden of Austen.

In many ways *Pride and Prejudice* is a nearly perfect novel: the wry ironic tone is unwavering, the pace remarkably lively without feeling excessively plotted. The sole exception to this is the ending. Austen is temperamentally unsuited to happily-ever-afters; the dénouements of all six of her novels feel hastily wrapped. But many of the other scenes are so fine—the ball at which Darcy first notices Elizabeth, the proposal by Mr. Collins and Mrs. Bennet's hysterical response, the unexpected meeting between Darcy and Elizabeth at Pemberley, the verbal dueling match between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine de Bourgh—that that is easily forgiven. The biggest problem with the ending of *Pride and Prejudice* is that it means this marvelous book is over.

Why has a story of the marrying off of young women in Regency England endured where most other novels of its time have sunk into obscurity? Ironically the answer is perhaps best found in those who have been, over two centuries, Austen's detractors. Critics have complained

that her books are devoid of the politics of her era, the tumult of the French and American revolutions. Yet it is precisely because she chose to investigate and illuminate the enduring issues of social pressures and gender politics that *Pride and Prejudice* seems as vital today as ever, the most modern of nineteenth-century novels.