

READING JANE AUSTEN

Whether you're new to Austen's work or know it backward and forward already, this book provides a clear, full and highly engaging account of how Austen's fiction works and why it matters. Exploring new pathways into the study of Jane Austen's writing, novelist and academic Jenny Davidson looks at Austen's work through a writer's lens, addressing formal questions about narration, novel writing, and fictional composition as well as themes including social and women's history, morals and manners. Introducing new readers to the breadth and depth of Jane Austen's writing, and offering new insights to those more familiar with Austen's work, Jenny Davidson celebrates the art and skill of one of the most popular and influential writers in the history of English literature.

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For my mother, with love and friendship

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Preface

I first read a battered yard-sale copy of *Pride and Prejudice* at the age of eight or nine. I am slightly ashamed to say that over the thirty-five years since then, I have probably read the novel as many as fifty times, although in recent years I am less likely to turn to it out of love or the need for comfort than because I am writing about it, and I still remember the thrill of teaching *Pride and Prejudice* as a PhD student and being given a “desk copy” of the Penguin edition: reading the book in a fresh edition felt almost like reading it for the first time. I love most of the authors I write about regularly – these include Swift, Richardson, Burke and Gibbon – but I don’t turn to any of them especially for comfort or consolation. I love Austen in a different way than I love Swift or Burke, which invites the question of whether or not love and associated states like identification and immersion are at odds with the goals and values of criticism, which include objectivity and analytic traction.

The topic of how we respond to books we love, as well as how that affects the critical discourse about them, has become a legitimate object of study in its own right, with Austen as a central example; though Shakespeare might be the most closely comparable instance in the English literary tradition, certain other authors undoubtedly continue to elicit curiously strong allegiances from unusually large numbers of readers (the three quite different names of J. R. R. Tolkien, Ayn Rand and Toni Morrison come immediately to mind).¹ I strongly believe that rather than canceling each other out, a productive tension exists between the different modes involved in loving books and in reading them to understand how they work, what they mean and why they matter, not least because both orientations depend heavily on the practice of repeated rereading, even or perhaps especially in the case of books we already know very well.

I have said that I love Austen. I would go so far as to say that my knowledge of her novels colors almost every aspect of my relationships with people, books and the world at large. I also hold a degree of suspicion

toward those who love Austen, though, myself included. Her work is by far the most popular subject I teach; an Austen seminar capped at eighteen might elicit seventy-five applications, and it will be tempting to dismiss out of hand all those submissions that blazon the student's love for Austen as the chief rationale for admission. Unfair as it may be, I have found that the student who rather dislikes Austen's fiction but wants to understand more about why others deem it interesting and important is more likely to contribute valuably to class discussion than the devoted admirer. One of the strongest tendencies that characterizes the admirer rather than the critic (of course I partake myself in both of these roles) involves talking about characters in novels as if they were real people, and while this may be another interesting and legitimate topic of recent literary-critical inquiry, as an unthinking habit, it tends to hamper conversation in a room where I mostly want to be talking about novelistic technique, social and political arguments and so forth.²

Austen's work isn't esoteric or difficult. The novels are relatively easy to understand at the level of language and plot. You don't really need to learn, as a reader of Austen, how to decode or decipher cryptic passages, and in this respect a book about reading Austen will have to take a somewhat different approach than one introducing readers to the work of a more obviously difficult writer like Milton or Joyce. Given that Austen's writing is already fairly accessible, then, what I want this book to do is to render it alluring to those who have not yet immersed themselves in her fictional worlds – and to make it strange to those who already know one or more of the novels well.

I also hope to counter the widespread but misleading notion that all of Austen's novels conform more or less perfectly to a fairy-tale romance plot. This premise, questionable even in the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, falls pretty quickly to pieces once you look at the other novels. As a corollary, I'd say that though any general book on Austen needs to give the reader significant new insights into *Pride and Prejudice* above all, insofar as it's her most popular novel both in and out of classrooms, one of the best ways to achieve that involves turning to the writings of Austen's earlier years. Both *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* are especially valuable in this respect, as they show Austen experimenting with techniques of voice and narration that will be more subtly rendered in the later novels, sometimes so much so that their workings become virtually undetectable. Even apart from that, close attention to style and details of language will often open up new insights into the most familiar passages. Consider the sentences that describe Elizabeth Bennet's first sight of Mr. Darcy's estate:

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Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste. They were all of them warm in their admiration; and at that moment she felt, that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!
 (PP III.i, 271)

If you are resistant to the sheer pragmatism of the world of *Pride and Prejudice*, you may look askance at the information that the sight of his magnificent property makes Elizabeth Bennet feel differently about marrying Darcy. Is the novel celebrating material covetousness when it singles out this surge of feeling for special mention? A good answer to that question will have to delve deeply into both ethical and stylistic questions. In terms of substance, it's important to note that this is far from being the direct analog of a modern character rating one of her suitors more highly when she realizes that he drives a Maserati. The estate of Pemberley represents a set of values that are profoundly custodial, ethically synonymous with a compelling vision of a stable, successfully paternalistic society that is already in danger of being lost and whose preservation in Darcy's estate represents an almost fantastically appealing vision of a social order that is well-governed and benevolent rather than precarious and chaotic.

This is true, as far as it goes, but I think that the choice of words reveals something else, something equally important, about the narrator's orientation toward Elizabeth's sensation. Look again at those three sentences. Do they celebrate Elizabeth's moment of strong feeling (it might be pride, regret, desire or some other mixture of emotions), or does the construction of the sentence somewhat undercut Elizabeth's readiness to revise her opinion of Darcy based on the sight of his property? Is the tone "straight" or tongue in cheek, and if there's some slight ironic undermining here, at whose expense does it come? Would it reflect on Elizabeth's sudden swerve toward more conventional values than she has hitherto embraced, or even perhaps on the values of a society that has allowed property to become synonymous with ethical substance?

Style or diction will be one of the most important factors in making this kind of a determination. Narrative tone can be evaluated at specific moments, of course, but it is also developed continuously over a novel as a whole. When Elizabeth does come, slightly later on, to understand how well suited she and Darcy would have been as partners, the insight brings significant emotional pain, given that her sister's scandalous elopement with Wickham has pretty much ruled out the possibility of an alliance between the two families. At precisely this juncture, something strikingly ironic enters the narrative voice: "But no such happy marriage could now

teach the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was. An union of a different tendency, and precluding the possibility of the other, was soon to be formed in their family” (*PP* III.8, 344). Where does that sarcasm come from? Is it Elizabeth Bennet’s own savagely self-protective irony, the scathing words (words that expose her own foolishness in fantasizing about a possibility now lost to her) offering compensation preemptively, in the face of a devastating foreclosure of possibility? Or does the irony derive principally from the narrator, and does it come at Elizabeth’s expense and from outside her consciousness?

This kind of question can’t have only one right answer. It will always be a matter of opinion. But becoming a more experienced and powerful literary critic involves honing your ability to marshal different kinds of evidence toward a coherent interpretation that might sway even a resistant reader toward your point of view. Thinking about style throughout Austen’s novels (especially “free indirect style” and the mysterious verbal alchemy that lets a third-person narrator swoop freely in and out of different characters’ consciousness) will let an individual reader amass a persuasive collection of evidence to support an argument about what’s happening at moments like these; that kind of argument in turn provides traction on larger, more obviously significant questions about what values the novel endorses, which kinds of argument about society and human interaction it blocks and which it furthers.

There are a number of different possible routes through this book. Reading the chapters from start to finish provides an obvious default, and you won’t go wrong proceeding in that fashion. Any given chapter can be read in isolation, though, if you have already homed in on a topic of interest and want to explore it in greater depth. If you are especially interested in formal questions about narration and novel-writing, you might turn first to the chapters on revision and voice, with the chapter on letters serving as a useful sequel. If you are interested in social history and women’s history, the final chapter on female economies (an earlier working title was “Love and Loss”) will be a good place to start. If you want to write novels yourself, the chapter on conversation probably offers the most immediate insights into fictional composition. If you are drawn to Austen’s fiction because it presents a powerful set of arguments about ethics and human behavior, arguments that belong in conversation with contemporary arguments in the disciplines of sociology and moral philosophy, the chapters on manners and morals are a more obvious point of entry.³ Equally, if you are reading only one of Austen’s novels and don’t want to have the others “spoiled” for you, you can use the index to navigate

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a path through this book that will prioritize readings and discussions of that particular book.

There must already be dozens of book-length treatments of Austen that proceed by considering each one of the major novels in chronological order, many of them very good, and I have recommended a few of my favorites in the suggestions for further reading that come at the end of this volume. References to Austen's works are given parenthetically in the text by volume, chapter and page number (I have used the Cambridge edition throughout), and I also refer occasionally to especially significant contemporary works and critical discussions whose details are provided in notes. Though chronology doesn't serve as this book's overriding rationale, I regularly consider questions of development over time, even as I move freely and associatively through the body of work Austen produced in a life that ended at the relatively early age of forty-one. Austen's work received only modest acclaim in her own time, but her reputation picked up momentum over the decades that followed, and for many years now she has been one of the single most popular and influential writers in the history of English literature.⁴ This book shows why that should be so.

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It is difficult to write appropriate acknowledgments for a book that is really the culmination of so many years of reading, writing and teaching. My views of Austen are strongly colored by my experience reading her novels with incredible teachers in college and graduate school, especially D. A. Miller, Claude Rawson and David Bromwich. Claudia L. Johnson was not my teacher in any formal sense, but her example continues to inspire me. When Linda Bree invited me to write this volume for the series, I seized the opportunity with huge excitement: she knows more about Austen than anybody else I know, but that is far from being the only reason that she is the ideal editor (indeed, the ideal reader) for this book. Her thoughtful comments on the manuscript have improved this book throughout. Thanks for the anonymous readers' reports on the proposal I submitted to the Cambridge University Press, and also for feedback from students and colleagues on a version of that proposal that Sarah Cole invited me to present in the Columbia Department of English and Comparative Literature's faculty works in progress series.

The undergraduates I've read Austen with are too many to name here, but I will thank them anyway for what I've learned reading Austen's novels in many different classrooms over several decades. Many graduate students, too, have helped me think more clearly about Austen and narration, but I must particularly thank two of my current doctoral students, Michael Paulson and Candace Cunard. My debt to Katie Gemmill for her work on conversation and the eighteenth-century novel is even more substantial; I have learned a great deal from her research and look forward to the book that will ensue. I regularly serve on committees for oral exams and dissertation defenses with departmental colleagues whose perceptiveness and learning about Austen as well as many other things gives me great pleasure: Nicholas Dames especially, but also Sharon Marcus, James Eli Adams, Erik Gray, Dustin Stewart and Julie Stone Peters. Teaching *Pride and Prejudice* in the context of Columbia's Literature Humanities sequence gave me

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a new perspective on why it is hard to teach Austen well, and I have benefited from conversation with course preceptors about their own experiences teaching the book. Others whose conversation about Austen and associated pleasures has helped me understand her writing better include Janet Min Lee, Tara Menon, Devoney Looser, Deborah Martinsen and Nicole Horesji.

I had an immersive initial spell of rereading in the peaceful environs of the Grandview Condominiums, Grand Cayman, courtesy of Brent Buckner, whose ability to welcome rather than merely tolerate my own frequent preference for reading over conversation is only one of the traits that make him my ideal partner. Life is also lightened and leavened by my brothers and their families, especially GG and Jack Maverick; my feline companions, Mickey and José; and my beloved grandfather Eugene Kilik, whose friendship has been one of the great pleasures of my life in New York. I belong to two communities (one online, one real-world) whose support and companionship make a huge difference to my daily quality of life: thanks to David Roche and the SWAP team, for keeping me reasonably consistent and reliably joyful as a runner; and to Joshua Hidalgo and the Chelsea Piers Powerlifting Team, for their strength, kindness and good humor.

I drafted most of this book during a truly idyllic term as Oliver Smithies Visiting Lecturer at Balliol College. Adam Smyth was an exemplary academic host, and the Oxford eighteenth-century community more generally provided warm welcome and support, Ros Ballaster especially. Victoria Holt's assistance in the college office was invaluable. A high point during that visit was the opportunity to present some thoughts about this project at one of Bruce's Brunches, courtesy of a lovely invitation from the Reverend Bruce Kinsey and the two student organizers of the series, Alexander Fuller and Eliza McHugh. My Mansfield Road (not Park) neighbor, Mary Fuller, was kind as well as sociable. Others whose conversation helped make the time in Oxford such a pleasure include David Russell, Kate McLoughlin, Jim McLaverty, Roger Lonsdale, Sir Drummond and Vivian Bone. Heartfelt thanks go to the teachers at YogaVenue, especially Susanne Kaesbauer; to Sy Wiggall; to the Oxford University Powerlifting Club; and to the gentleman with a bottle and newspapers who invariably greeted me, as I ran very slowly past his chosen bench in Christ Church Meadow, with encouraging words ("Good effort, miss!").

I finished most of the final revisions to the manuscript while enjoying the luxurious hospitality of the American Academy in Rome, courtesy of

the Michael I. Sovern/Columbia University Affiliated Fellowship awarded by the Columbia University Provost's Office. Additional funds toward that stay were contributed by the office of the Dean of Humanities at Columbia, Sharon Marcus, and I am extremely grateful for Columbia's financial support as well as for the lively community I found at the Academy. I wrote this book during a full year of paid leave from my home institution, a fact that speaks to a remarkable degree of privilege in a time when the conditions for writing and publishing academic criticism have become difficult or impossible for many, and I would like to register at once my gratitude for that good fortune and my painful awareness of how rare it has come to be.

Reading Jane Austen is dedicated to my mother because anything else would be just plain wrong! She and I have been reading Austen together for more years than I can count. Her love and support are beyond measure; this book represents only an inadequate token of gratitude.

Abbreviations

All citations of Austen's writings are to the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen, whose general editor is Janet Todd. Individual volumes are given as follows:

- J* *Juvenilia*, ed. Peter Sabor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)
- NA* *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Barbara Benedict and Deirdre Le Faye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)
- SS* *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Edward Copeland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)
- PP* *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Pat Rogers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)
- MP* *Mansfield Park*, ed. John Wiltshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)
- E* *Emma*, ed. Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)
- P* *Persuasion*, ed. Janet Todd and Antje Blank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)
- LM* *Later Manuscripts*, ed. Janet Todd and Linda Bree (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)
- JAL* *Jane Austen's Letters*, 4th edn., ed. Deirdre Le Faye (2011; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)
- MJA* *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, J. E. Austen-Leigh, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)
- FR* *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, 2nd edn., Deirdre Le Faye (1989; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)