

JANE AUSTEN

1775-1817



A sketch of Jane Austen by her sister Cassandra ©

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”
(Opening line, *Pride and Prejudice*)

“There are some great writers who wrote too much. There are others who wrote enough. There are yet others who wrote nothing like enough to satisfy their admirers, and Jane Austen is certainly one of these. There would be more genuine rejoicing at the discovery of a complete new novel by Jane Austen than any other literary discovery, short of a new play by Shakespeare, than one can imagine. As there will be no discovery, her readers will have to satisfy themselves with re-reading her six masterpieces (and it is generally agreed that they bear re-reading exceptionally well), and with her lesser and unfinished works.” (*Margaret Drabble, CBE*)

Springing from the upper middle class society of late eighteenth century southern England, this was the milieu in which Jane Austen spent her entire life and which she describes so memorably in her novels. Indeed, her environment and good connections with the middling-rich landed gentry provided her with material ideally suited to her talents: accurate observation of character, wit, dramatic intuition, an ear for realistic dialogue and a highly disciplined formal sense. She focused on middle-class provincial life with humour and understanding, depicting minor landed gentry, country clergymen and their families, in which marriage mainly determined women’s social status. Although there has been criticism that her novels passed over the historical events of the Napoleonic wars, her wit and observant narrative touch has been an inexhaustible delight to readers. She famously stated that “three or four families in a country village is the thing to work on” and the strength of her novels is the social observations they contain. She employed a strong sense of irony in her critique of aristocratic disaffection and the pretensions of the nouveau riche. With a measured sardonic eye she was able to summarise social mores and the restraints suffered by women in Regency England. Her sense of the ridiculous is revealed so admirably in characters such as Mr Collins (*Pride and Prejudice*), Miss Bates (*Emma*), John Thorpe (*Northanger Abbey*), and the Parker sisters (*Sanditon*) to name but a few of the writer’s favourites.

Jane Austen was born 16 December 1775 in Steventon, Hampshire, where her father, Rev. George Austen, was a rector. The second daughter and seventh child in a family of eight, it was here that she spent the first very happy 25 years of her life, until her father’s retirement took them to Bath, a place she disliked intensely. After his death in 1805, she moved around with her mother until in 1809 they settled in Chawton, near Alton, Hampshire in a house owned by her brother, Edward. Here she remained, except for a few visits to London, until May 1817 when she moved to Winchester to be near her doctor. She had been ill for at least a year, suffering from Addison’s

Disease, a disease which was then incurable and inexplicable and she died on 18 July 1817 at the age of 41. Her remains are buried in Winchester Cathedral. Her sister Cassandra wrote of Jane as she lay in her coffin “there is such a sweet serene air over her countenance as is quite pleasant to contemplate.”

Although mainly tutored at home, and irregularly at school, she actually received a much broader education than many women of her time. She appears to have got on extremely well with her intelligent, handsome father, whose encouragement of her work must have been a great help, whereas her mother seems to have been something of a trial, hypochondriac and ailing, though very long-lived. Jane Austen’s world was limited and she thus drew on her own experiences and knowledge. Was it her parent’s marriage, therefore, that created the male character in some of her novels who, enticed by a pretty young face, finds he has married a very silly woman with whom to spend the rest of his life?

Her social life was active and she had suitors and romantic dreams, apparently agreeing to marry one Thomas Lefroy only to change her mind the following morning. Elsewhere, however, it is written that as he needed to acquire money through marriage, their friendship could never blossom owing to the fact that Jane had none herself.

As a girl she wrote stories, including burlesques of popular romances. Her works were published only after much revision, four novels being published during her lifetime. These are *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Emma* (1816). Two other novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, were published posthumously in 1818 with a biographical notice by her brother, Henry Austen, the first formal announcement of her authorship. *Persuasion* was written in a race against failing health in 1815-16. She also left two earlier compositions, a short epistolary novel, *Lady Susan* (written in letter form, a style popular in the eighteenth century) around 1793, and an unfinished novel, *The Watsons*, a tantalizing, delightful and highly accomplished fragment which must surely have equalled her other six novels, had she finished it. Although started in Bath in 1804, it was laid aside and never finished, possibly due to the death of her father. Her first version of *Sense and Sensibility*, originally entitled *Elinor and Marianne*, was also written in letter form. At the time of her death, she was working on a new novel, *Sanditon*, a fragmentary draft of which survives. This work is strikingly different in some ways to her previous works and surprising in as much as the subject of health looms rather large but even more surprising is the manner in which she treats it. Three of her characters are hypochondriacs, drawn in a spirit of exaggerated comedy, and extremely entertaining to the reader.

Following her death *Emma* was reviewed thus by Sir Walter Scott in his journal “Miss Austen had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I have ever met with.”

For those of us who adore her work, it is surprising to learn that prior to her nephew, Edward Austen-Leigh, then vicar of Bray, publishing a memoir of his aunt in 1870, 53 years after her death, there was no real public interest in her life and little in her works. She had been a copious letter writer, especially to her sister Cassandra (who also never married) and many had been preserved. Thanks to the publication of these from 1870 onwards, together with her nephew’s memoirs and to later family reminiscences, and to the researches both of scholars and amateurs, we now probably know as much of the social life of Jane Austen among her family and friends as of any author who ever lived.

To the modern day reader, Jane Austen’s novels (and indeed her letters) provide a wealth of social history and a fascinating insight into life in this period. The writer cannot get enough! Indeed I have read each novel too many times to recall. Nothing is diminished by each successive reading. Re-reading the dialogue and re-visiting the characters never fails to give immense pleasure and delight. She had that exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting.