

Jane Austen: Cult Maven

No doubt each of us has had a brush with literary darling Jane Austen. Some of us studiously tackled the required reading in a high school or college British Lit class, and some of us found her with a little help from Colin Firth. Either in his role as Fitzwilliam Darcy in the 1995 BBC/A&E adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, or as Mark Darcy in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*. It doesn't really matter how we know her or even what we think of her. What matters is the stunning and ongoing nature of her legacy.

This month marks the two hundredth anniversary of the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*. Big deal, right? Classic literature hundreds of years older than that particular novel is still being taught, studied, and written about. What makes this anniversary impressive is that, while it's been 195 years since Jane Austen's death, as far as the publishing world is concerned, she is very much alive and kicking.

Her Influence on the Publishing World

Over the past year and a half, Jane Austen-influenced books have been published by Sourcebooks Landmark, Kensington, Balzer + Bray, HarperCollins, Bloomsbury USA, St. Martin's Griffin, Knopf, Penguin Books, Bantam, Ballantine Books, Tor Books, and Berkley Trade, not to even mention the legions of Austen-inspired self-published books that were released in that time period. And Austen continues to increase her literary footprint on the landscape of publishing this year. These books run the gamut, from spin-offs and retellings of Ms. Austen's six classic novels, to continuations and homages. They are both fiction and non-fiction, literary novels, mysteries, chick-lit, romance, young adult, and even self-help and travel. Being particularly character-driven, her plotlines are relatively straightforward, making them well-suited to a wide variety of settings and situations. Even *Pride & Prejudice: A BabyLit Counting Primer* manages to hit the main plot points. All that remains is for Disney to get on board the Jane Austen Love Train.

It is clear that both readers and writers alike are smitten: both want to recapture that special something that lives on in Jane Austen's six classic novels. We're thrilled to hitch our wagon to Jane's still-sparkly star and hope that each new book rekindles our love of those original six. But what is it? What is it about that snarky, witty spinster that makes us gulp down her own novels and clamor for more? Why are Jane's novels so adored while *Moby Dick* languishes, misunderstood?

Jane's Continued Appeal

Shannon Hale, best-selling author of *Austenland* says, "So many classics have to be studied to be appreciated. Austen is still so accessible, nearly 200 years later. That big whale just had no sense of humor." Laurel Ann Nattress, Austen blogger and editor of *Jane Austen Made Me Do It*

had this to add, “Moby Dick is a classic, but it is about a big, wet fish. I would much rather contemplate the charms of falling for a hero like Captain Wentworth. His side of the ship is so much more interesting.” Jane’s stories and situations—and the emotions they inspire—still resonate, despite the changes in the world, wrought by industrialization and technology. She has crafted likeable, relatable characters, whose lives draw us in without any of the usual trappings. “Austen’s a storyteller, not just a [insert musical flourish here] Great Novelist,” says Amy Elizabeth Smith, author of *All Roads Lead to Austen: A Year-long Journey with Jane* and Associate Professor of English at the University of the Pacific. “People love good story tellers, and reading Austen feels like spending quality time with our smart, funny, snarky-but-good-hearted best buddy.” Or perhaps even like reading someone’s private journal when they’re not looking...

But Jane is more than stories—more than fiction. Some readers have used her works to inspire their lives. Amy Smith shared my interview questions with her “Jane Austen” class, and one of her students, Kelsey Belomy, sent back answers because, “I love Jane too much to not!” In her opinion, Jane’s popularity has exploded for the simple reason that, “There is something in Austen that everyone can relate to. We empathize with her heroes and heroines, so often kept apart for monetary reasons, and we root for them and relish in their eventual success.” And hope for a happily-ever-after of our own. Some authors have capitalized on their ability to translate Austen storylines into life advice, suggested behaviors, and modern etiquette in a completely different world, and they’ve succeeded because people trust Jane to steer them on the course to love, romance, and happiness. In Jane’s novels, every character gets what is deserved, whether it be a happily-ever-after, or a comeuppance. In Jane’s novels, life is fair.

The Romantic Attachment

But when did Jane get to be such a heavyweight, literarily speaking? She started out the way she meant to go on. Once she managed to get over the hurdle of getting them published, her books were well received by reviewers and the public alike. Perhaps readers wanted a respite from the melodramatic works of many of her contemporaries. Perhaps they wanted a little believable romance... “Jane Austen is widely credited with being the mother of romance fiction, mainly because Mr. Darcy is the quintessential romantic hero,” says Deb Werksman, editor at Sourcebooks. Sharon Lathan, author of multiple Austen adaptations and the upcoming *The Passions of Dr. Darcy*, agrees, “Regency romances exist because of her.” Talk about a publishing legacy!

While Jane got off to a solid start on her own, her influence, most notably in the form of fan fiction, has broadened her fan base considerably. One particular adaptation of her work spurred her to full-on cult status: the 1995 BBC/A&E *Pride & Prejudice* mini-series, starring a very-memorable, pond-soaked Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy. “Colin Firth was the inspiration for a huge outpouring of fan fiction sequels, continuations, retellings, and reimaginings of *Pride and Prejudice*, many of which were self-published,” says Deb Werksman. Laurel Ann Nattress continues, “After the incredible success of the mini-series, publishers saw what a draw Austen’s

characters were to the public. Sequels started arriving soon after. With the explosion of self-publishing, the Austenesque fiction genre is now a cottage industry.” With the face of Mr. Darcy.

Whether you prefer Colin Firth or Matthew Macfadyen, it is likely you are not immune to Jane’s consummate romantic hero. He is at once arrogant, brooding, principled...and *sexy*. We want him taken down a peg, and we want witty Elizabeth to do the take down. Whether reading or watching, we are enormously invested in the story of *Pride and Prejudice*—he is the tortured hero, but she can fix him! And he can fix her rather intolerable and hopeless financial situation. They are both so misunderstood—Austen has penned a novel in which each scene must play out in order to reach the oh-so-satisfying conclusion. There are no throwaway misunderstandings; there is no starting over; there is only an utterly believable string of characters, situations, and feelings that stand in the way of Lizzie and Darcy being together. It’s real.

Fan-Fiction Phenomenon

And while *Pride and Prejudice* is a perfectly satisfying, sigh-invoking, swoon-worthy read, as are each of Jane’s other novels, six little novels are simply not enough! “We fall in love with the characters and want them to live forever,” says Margie Longoria, founder of the Austenites Book Club, “Retellings are a great way to visit with the characters you love, and this is what loyal Janeites love most. If her characters live on, then she does too in many ways.” And she can hardly object to a few storyline tweaks here and there. “Sometimes we don’t necessarily like how Austen resolves certain relationships—so what better way to fix things than to pick up the characters and run with them,” says Amy Elizabeth Smith.

Fan fiction, by definition, lets you play in a world of pre-existing characters, settings, and situations. If you’re a writer, the advantages to tapping into this magical little world are obvious: it lets you put your own spin on a classic, and as Shannon Hale puts it, “There’s a large in-crowd of readers who can appreciate the spin-offs and playful retellings.” A ready-made audience. The flip side is that your efforts won’t, at least by some measure, stand alone. They will be unavoidably held up against the classic you’ve chosen to reimagine. Held up by a contingent of devoted fans who expect certain standards to be met, among them, originality, creativity, character loyalty, care, and affection.

There is certainly no shortage of Jane Austen fan fiction (or non-fiction) in the market today, and the rise of e-books will surely expand the offerings further still. It is that very fan fiction—and one screenplay in particular—that boosted Jane Austen’s cult following to the level and frenzy it has reached today. And it remains self-propagating. There will always be readers of Jane Austen’s six classic novels, but fan fiction is introducing Jane to new reader contingencies through graphic novels, dystopian retellings, and a variety of young adult reimaginings. Some authors have even thrown zombies into the mix. Says high school librarian and Jane Austen devotee Margie Longoria, “I had a student who read *Prom and Prejudice* by Elizabeth Eulberg, loved it, and asked me if I had the original *Pride and Prejudice*. She wasn’t sure because the

book is 200 years old. I told her of course we had it! I am anxiously waiting for her to come back so we can talk Lizzie and Darcy.”

When asked her opinion on whether too many authors had hitched their wagon to Jane’s star, Sharon Lathan replied, “The Austen literary fiction genre has thrived and proven its staying power. Austen authors are as dedicated to their craft and serious about their writing as any author of any genre. I believe we have lovingly surrounded Jane’s star and encouraged it to soar higher.” Perhaps to infinity and beyond. ‘Beyond’ including cinematic adaptations as well. *Austenland*, the movie, based on Shannon Hale’s best-selling novel of the same name, is in post-production, and *Bridget Jones’s Baby*, starring the incomparable Colin Firth, is in pre-production. The cottage industry is indeed flourishing.

The popularity of Jane Austen is testament, first of course, to her enduring novels, in which she has brought so many memorable characters to life, to the point that they linger on in our hearts and minds. She wrote what she knew, with wit, heart, spunk, and a romantic soul. She wrote love stories with regular people. They made mistakes, and they fixed them. If it mattered. Her heroines were intelligent, determined, free-thinking women; her heroes were gentlemen: chivalrous, honorable, and kind. She wrote the stories of Everywoman, and we love them because it is our greatest wish to have our own lovely happily-ever-after.

You may not be a devotee of Jane Austen fan fiction, or even a fan of those original six novels (heaven forbid!), but given the level Jane’s popularity has reached today, it couldn’t hurt to consider “*What Would Jane Do?*” The answer just might prompt the development of a romantic Captain Wentworth-type hero who inspires a wave of fan fiction and sets the foundation for a long-lasting legacy. So get yourself a bracelet! Or at the very least, an action figure.



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