

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Jane Austen

About the Book:

Elizabeth Bennet is young, attractive, independent and smart. The second of five daughters, her incisive outlook on nineteenth century English middle class society makes her a favourite with her father. On the contrary her mother, a highly frivolous and foolish woman whose obsession is to marry her five daughters, thinks her too clever for her own good. Jane, the eldest daughter, is the most good-natured and sensible of Elizabeth's sisters, and a worthy confidante. In dire need of financial security, marriage seems to be, for Elizabeth and her sisters, the only escape.

The arrival of charming Mr Bingley and arrogant Mr Darcy in the neighbourhood promises great changes in all their lives. And with a regiment in a nearby town, the youngest daughters run wilder than ever.

This tale of friendship, rivalry, enmity and love is also an insightful and witty satire of family relations and society.

'The best-loved book by our best-loved novelist' *Independent*

'Like Irvine Welsh, I am a great admirer of Jane Austen' Alexander McCall Smith

'The wit of Jane Austen has for partner the perfection of her taste' Virginia Woolf

'The Mozart opera of novels and again a transcendent union of structure and content in which unhappy marriage is the reward for those who show a weakness of character and lifelong happiness is a province reserved only for those "who truly know themselves"'
Kate Atkinson

'For those of us who suspect 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' Anna Quindlen

'How could these novels ever seem remote... the gaiety is unextinguished today, the irony has kept its bite, the reasoning is still sweet, the sparkle undiminished, as comedies they are irresistibly and as nearly flawless as any fiction could be' Eudora Welty

About the author:

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775 at the rectory in Steventon, a small village in north-east Hampshire. She was the seventh child and second daughter of the Rev. George Austen and his wife Cassandra. Just like Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, Rev. Austen was not wealthy and could not have given much to his daughters to marry on.

Jane Austen was educated mainly at home although her and her sister Cassandra spent a year in the Abbey boarding school in Reading.

Jane was a keen reader and a fierce defender of the novel at a time when it was looked down upon. She is known to have declared that her and her family were ‘great novel readers, and not ashamed of being so.’

At the age of fourteen she wrote her first novel, *Love and Freindship* (sic.). She later wrote *First Impressions* (1796-1797), *Elinor and Marianne* (1797) and *Northanger Abbey* (1798-1799). At the time, *First Impressions* was rejected by Cadell.

Although she continued to write - she started *The Watsons* and *Lady Susan* - she did not complete another novel for over ten years after *Northanger Abbey*.

Jane settled in Bath in 1801 where she enjoyed balls and society. After her father’s death in 1805 however, the family moved to Clifton and then Southampton.

It is not until after she moved to Chawton in Hampshire in 1809 that Jane became prolific again, and between this time and her death she wrote *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*. Most importantly, she revised *Elinor and Marianne* which was published at her own risk as *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811. This novel received good reviews and Austen earned £140 from the sales. Emboldened by this success, Austen revised *First Impressions*, which became *Pride and Prejudice*. It was published in 1813. Her novels were published anonymously, although her family knew of her authorship and this knowledge later spread.

In 1816, however, Austen became ill. It is believed she suffered from Addison’s disease. She died on July 18, 1817 and was buried in Winchester Cathedral.

Starting Points for Discussion:

1. The themes of pride and prejudice are discernable at different points through the novel. Which characters are proud and/or prejudiced? What are the consequences for them? What lessons do they learn?
2. *Pride and Prejudice* is also a novel about marriage. Four weddings take place in the course of the novel: Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins, Lydia Bennet and Mr. Wickham, Jane Bennet and Mr. Bingley and Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. How do these marriages differ and what can we conclude?
3. What are the similarities and differences between the marriages of Lydia and Wickham and Mr. and Mrs. Bennet?
4. Mr. Bennet appears at the beginning of the novel as a intelligent and amiable man. Does this perception change during the novel? If so, when and why?
5. There are several instances where women are portrayed as fundamentally dependent on men and men’s fortune. The main example lies in the discussions and scenes relating to the entailment of Longbourn to Mr. Collins. In what other instances is this dependence described? Is it always in a negative light? How do different characters react to this dependence?
6. Elizabeth Bennet is very independent for her times. During her confrontation with Lady Catherine de Bourgh, she declares ‘I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me” (p. 338).

Are there any other references to women's independence in this novel? If so, is independence always seen as something positive?

7. An important feature of this novel is the interweaving of comedy, romance and satire. How is each of these elements important to the novel's success and how does Austen manage juggling between these styles?

Other Books by the Jane Austen:

Novels:

Sense and Sensibility (1811)

Mansfield Park (1814)

Emma (1815)

Northanger Abbey (1817 – Posthumously)

Persuasion (1817 – Posthumously)

Unfinished works:

Lady Susan

The Watsons

Sanditon

Suggested Further Reading:

Sense and Sensibility, Jane Austen

Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte

(<http://www.randomhouse.co.uk/readersgroup/readingguide.htm?command=Search&db=/catalog/main.txt&eqisbndata=0099511126>)

Wuthering Heights, Emily Bronte

Great Expectations, Charles Dickens

Howard's End, E.M. Forster

The Cranford Chronicles, Elizabeth Gaskell

Vanity Fair, William Makepeace Thackeray