

Books Worth Revisiting: Three by Jane Austen

What can one say about the incomparable Jane Austen (1775-1817)? Considered one of the greatest authors in English literature, her six completed novels have been the source for numerous movies and television mini-series. Her novels are often described as “comedies of manners” and come laced with witty commentary and a keen sense of social satire. Books interpreting Jane Austen the writer and the woman abound. Surprisingly though, not much is known about Austen, as most of her personal papers were destroyed by herself or family members. As a brilliant observer of the world around her, however, she has left her avid readers—known as “Janeites”—an open door into early 19th century English society. While *Pride and Prejudice* is both the best-known and most popular of her novels, here are three others that are worth revisiting.

Sense and Sensibility. This was the first of Jane Austen’s novels to be published and was originally titled, *Elinor and Marianne*. Austen is known to have begun this book as early as the mid-1790s and to have revised it extensively before it was finally published in 1811. The novel follows the romantic travails of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, who with their mother and younger sister Margaret, find their comfortable lives disrupted by the death of their father and their half-brother’s taking over of the family estate. Elinor represents “sense,” being quiet and thoughtful while keeping her emotional turmoil bottled up inside. Marianne represents “sensibility,” being outspoken, impetuous, and wildly romantic. Elinor falls in love with her sister-in-law’s elder brother, Edward Ferrars, but he seems to be hopelessly out of reach. Marianne, meanwhile, embarks on a whirlwind romance with a handsome young gentleman named Willoughby while ignoring the attentions of an older suitor, Colonel Brandon. As the two sisters struggle with their troubles, their bond as sisters is put to the test. **To order this book, call 1-800-252-9605. Also available for download from the BARD site.**

Mansfield Park. Published in 1814, *Mansfield Park* is different in tone and plotting from Austen’s other novels. It is an ensemble piece, more a soap opera than a romance with an engaging heroine. While most of Austen’s heroines are intelligent, sprightly, and self-sufficient, Fanny Price is so timid and self-effacing that she almost vanishes inside the story, just as she often vanishes into her isolated room at Mansfield Park. The ugly side of family life

also is on full display. As a child, Fanny comes to Mansfield Park as the charitable project of her two aunts. One aunt is indolent and only cares about her lap dogs, while the other aunt is an unpleasant busybody who never lets Fanny forget that she is a poor relation living at Mansfield Park on sufferance. Fanny's uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, while not an unkind man, is so detached and preoccupied that he hardly notices the true state of his own family. Bertram's two daughters, Maria and Julia, grow up vain and idle with disastrous consequences; Tom, the eldest son and heir, is headstrong and careless. Only Edmund, the younger son, is steady and responsible, but he falls under the sway of the beautiful and cynical Mary Crawford. Fanny is in love with Edmund and watches this budding romance with pain and misgivings, while finding herself the object of unwanted gallantry when Mary's brother Henry decides to make Fanny fall in love with him. One point of interest is the character of Fanny's brother William, who is a midshipman in the Royal Navy. Austen here draws on personal experience for she had two brothers in the Royal Navy, both of whom eventually became admirals. **To order this book, call 1-800-252-9605. Also available for download from the BARD site.**

Emma. *Emma* is generally considered to be Austen's masterpiece and was certainly the first of her novels to garner serious critical acclaim. Published in late 1815, it was the last of her novels that was published before Austen's death in 1817 at the age of 41. Emma Woodhouse is a wealthy and self-assured young lady in her early twenties. She lives with her widowed father, who is something of a hypochondriac and always a worry-wart. Emma does not see herself ever marrying for fear of upsetting her father who constantly laments the marriages of her elder sister and of her former governess. While Emma is content to contemplate her own spinsterhood, she nevertheless thinks marriage a good thing for everyone else and spends most of her time maneuvering her friends and acquaintances into courtship and marriage. While she has the best of motives, her efforts often backfire, sometimes with very comical results. Emma's various attempts at matchmaking are under constant observation from her good friend and neighbor George Knightley. Emma is jolted out of her complacency when she realizes that someone else may have matrimonial plans for Mr. Knightley. This novel also contains two of Austen's best-drawn characters in the social-climbing vicar Mr. Elton and his obnoxious wife Augusta. **To order this book, call 1-800-252-9605. Also available for download from the BARD site.**