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BOOKS

The Best Jane Austen Novels to Read During Her 250th Birthday Year

Celebrate the beloved author by diving into one of her books — or the many TV, film and literary spin-offs she's inspired

By Maria Speidel, AARP

Published September 16, 2025

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ANDREA D'AQUINO

In This Article

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This year marks the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen’s birth. While the precise day is December 16, the book world has been marking the occasion all year with homages, story spin-offs, new editions of her novels and celebrations, including a massive 10-day Jane Austen festival this month in Bath, England.

The beloved English novelist, whose stories have launched a million rom-coms, could hardly have imagined the vastness of her influence more than 200 years after she published her stories anonymously – or “by a lady.”



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Austen’s presence can be felt across our entertainment culture, from the *Emma*-inspired film *Clueless* (1995) to the 1996 novel (and later, film) *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, whose plot author Helen Fielding admits she “nicked” from *Pride and Prejudice*. British writer Ian McEwan has said Austen’s

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Elinor and Marianne Dashwood; Outlander's Caitriona Balfe plays their mother.



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Who was Jane Austen?

Austen, one of eight siblings, was born in 1775 to a clergyman in rural southern England. She began writing stories around age 11, when her formal education ended. Her father always encouraged her to read, offering her full access to his extensive home library, and gave her a portable wooden writing desk for her 19th birthday. When she was 25, her father retired, and the remaining members of her household – the Rev. and Mrs. Austen, Jane and Cassandra – downsized from the roomy rectory to smaller quarters in Bath, a fading resort town.

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Women whose energies were narrowed to husbands seeking in the limited society of late 18th-century England. As a single woman with almost no career path available, like many ladies in her day, Austen captured how landing a prosperous husband was essential for financial security and social acceptance, often at the expense of love. “[Her books] are about how to live a meaningful life in a world that’s deeply unfair,” Looser says. “And that speaks to a lot of people.”

2. She used humor to brilliant effect. She also brought the funny, whether through *Pride and Prejudice*’s Mrs. Bennet’s humblebragging about her daughters or *Persuasion*’s Sir Walter Elliot, who reads about “his own history with an interest that never failed.” Looser says Austen was exceptional for “creat[ing] comic fiction of lasting genius, either on the level of the word, sentence, chapter, character or plot. These characters resemble real people.”

3. She understood love. “*Pride and Prejudice* is the uber-romance novel,” says best-selling YA novelist Nicola Yoon (*Everything, Everything*), who wrote the introduction to the new Vintage Classic edition of the book. “You can see [Elizabeth and Darcy] working their way towards each other, [but] before they can get to each other, they have to get through themselves and their flaws and obstacles,” Yoon says. “We’re still feeling what Jane Austen wanted us to feel. It’s a bit magical.”

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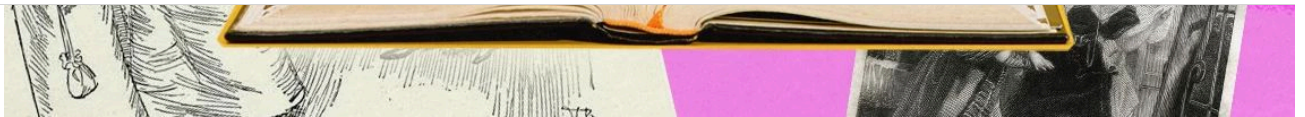
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Five Jane Austen novels to read now

All of Austen's work is in the public domain and can be downloaded free on [Project Gutenberg](#), [Apple Books](#) and other sites.

1. *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)

Austen's most beloved book opens with one of English literature's most famous lines: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." Indeed, when the wealthy, handsome and single Mr. Bingley arrives in their quiet English village, the five single and dowryless Bennet sisters are set off. They attend balls, flirt, develop crushes, misdirect and misread signals. Prejudiced and somewhat oblivious (at first), Elizabeth Bennet eventually finds herself drawn to Mr. Bingley's proud and very rich friend, Mr. Darcy.

Watch: The 1995 BBC miniseries with Jennifer Ehle as Elizabeth Bennet and Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy will forever duke it out with 2005's movie starring Keira Knightley and a pre-*Succession* Matthew Macfadyen.

Listen: Audible offers an [anniversary edition](#) of the novel voiced by actors, including Marisa Abela and Bill Nighy.



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Listen: Actress Greta Scacchi reads [this version](#).

3. Emma (1815)

Emma Woodhouse is singular among Austen's financially struggling heroines. Austen writes that Emma is "handsome, clever, and rich." Alas, Emma mistakes her good fortune for good sense when, as a sort of charity project, she tries to help her less-well-off protégé, Harriet, find love. Spoiler alert: It does not go as planned, leading to farcical confusion among the village's singles, including Emma herself, who discovers she has feelings for Harriet's crush.

Watch: The modern adaptation *Clueless* captures Austen's spirit. Autumn de Wilde's 2020 film with Anya Taylor-Joy is gorgeous and accurate.

Listen: Actress Emma Thompson reads a [popular version](#) of the audiobook, along with a full supporting cast.

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4. Mansfield Park (1814)

Fanny Price is the only Austen heroine we meet as a child, when her insolvent parents fob her off on her wealthy Aunt and Uncle Bertram. The Bertrams' money comes from a plantation in Antigua, which introduces one of many moral questions in Austen's most somber work. *Mansfield Park* is Austen's Cinderella story. Mousy, quiet Fanny is ridiculed by her two spoiled female cousins and bullied by a hanger-on aunt, Mrs. Norris. Only her male cousin, Edmund, is kind. While Elizabeth Bennet is often portrayed as Austen's strongest character, meek Fanny stands up for herself, refusing a conveniently wealthy but untrustworthy suitor.

Watch: Patricia Rozema's 1999 movie version has its lovers and haters. For a deep cut, consider the 1990 indie film *Metropolitan*, which offers multiple Austen references.

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Listen: Actress Rosamund Pike beautifully narrates a 2018 [audiobook version](#).

Austen's other writings include *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and the lesser-known books *Lady Susan*, *The Watsons*, and *Sanditon* — her last novel, which she left unfinished and is the basis for a TV series (2019-2023) on PBS. *Lady Susan* inspired the 2016 Whit Stillman film *Love & Friendship*, starring Kate Beckinsale and Chloë Sevigny.

Maria Speidel is a writer who lives in Los Angeles with a house full of books.

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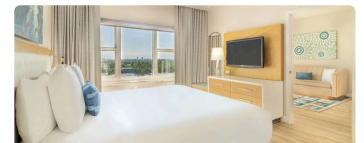
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