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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

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ANDREA D'AQUINO

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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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Bollywood movies, graphic novels, erotic fiction and monster tales (2009 brought the bestseller *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* by Seth Grahame-Smith and *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, a parody by Ben H. Winters).

Today you can stream *Jane Austen Wrecked My Life*, a rom-com about a lovelorn, Austen-obsessed bookseller in Paris, and *Miss Austen*, a four-part PBS miniseries released in May that reimagines the lives of Jane and her sister, Cassandra.

Two new film versions of her books are in the works too: [Netflix's](#) upcoming six-part *Pride and Prejudice*, now in production, stars Emma Corrin (Diana in *The Crown*) as Elizabeth Bennet, Olivia Colman as Mrs. Bennet, and Scottish actor Jack Lowden as Mr. Darcy. Focus Features is filming a new *Sense and Sensibility* movie with Daisy Edgar-Jones (*Twister*) and Esmé Creed-Miles as sisters Elinor and Marianne Dashwood; *Outlander's* Caitriona Balfe plays their mother.

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

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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.

After Rev. Austen's death four years later, Jane, Cassandra, their mother, and a family friend moved into Chawton Cottage, now the Jane Austen House Museum. There, the author revised and wrote her six novels on a tiny, portable writing table. She died at 41 of a mysterious illness.

Austen scholars say this life was not as dreary as the bare facts suggest: She loved going to London, attending the theater, shopping, taking holidays by sea, where she enjoyed being dunked in the ocean by an old-fashioned bathing machine, and gossip. In a new book, *Wild for Austen: A Rebellious, Subversive, and Untamed Jane*, Arizona State University professor Devoney Looser expands on instances of the author's worldliness (Austen once bragged that she was excellent at spotting adulteresses, for example).

More reasons to love Jane

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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," says Looser. "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."

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

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)

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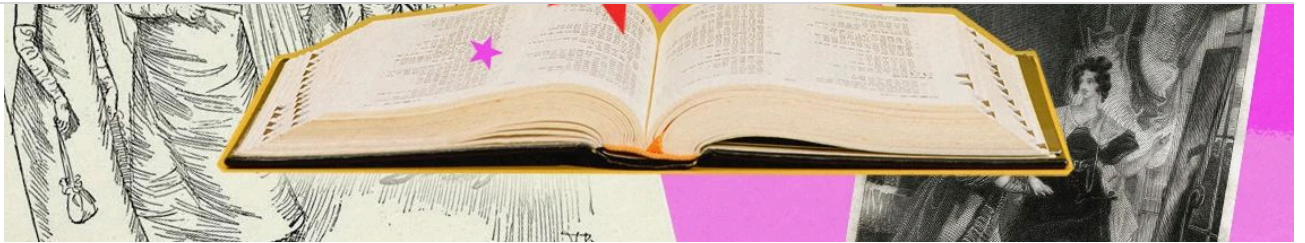
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Austen's most beloved book opens with one of English literature's most famous lines: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." Indeed, when the wealthy, handsome and single Mr. Bingley arrives in their quiet English village, the five single and dowerless 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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match with the then-penniless navy man as “a throwing away.” Written shortly before Austen’s death, *Persuasion* is the template for every Hallmark Channel movie about second chances. It is also the work of a mature woman who understands the consequences of not standing up for oneself, particularly among the noise of an insensitive family. It’s worth reading for Wentworth’s famous, heart-stopping “I am half hope, half agony” letter alone.

Watch: Many Janeites recommend the BBC 1995 TV movie with Amanda Root and Ciarán Hinds.

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.

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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.

Listen: LibriVox fans love the [free version](#) recorded by Karen Savage.

5. Sense and Sensibility (1811)

Austen's first published novel features the Dashwood family facing the death of its patriarch. It leaves his wife and three daughters homeless because his estate will be passed on to his son from his first marriage, John, and his odious wife. Though John promised to honor his dying father's wishes that he care for his stepmother and stepsisters, he essentially kicks them to the curb. The four women depart to a more modest home, and the two eldest daughters, sensible Elinor and emotion-driven Marianne, find themselves disadvantaged by their diminished fortune in their search for partners in class-obsessed English society.

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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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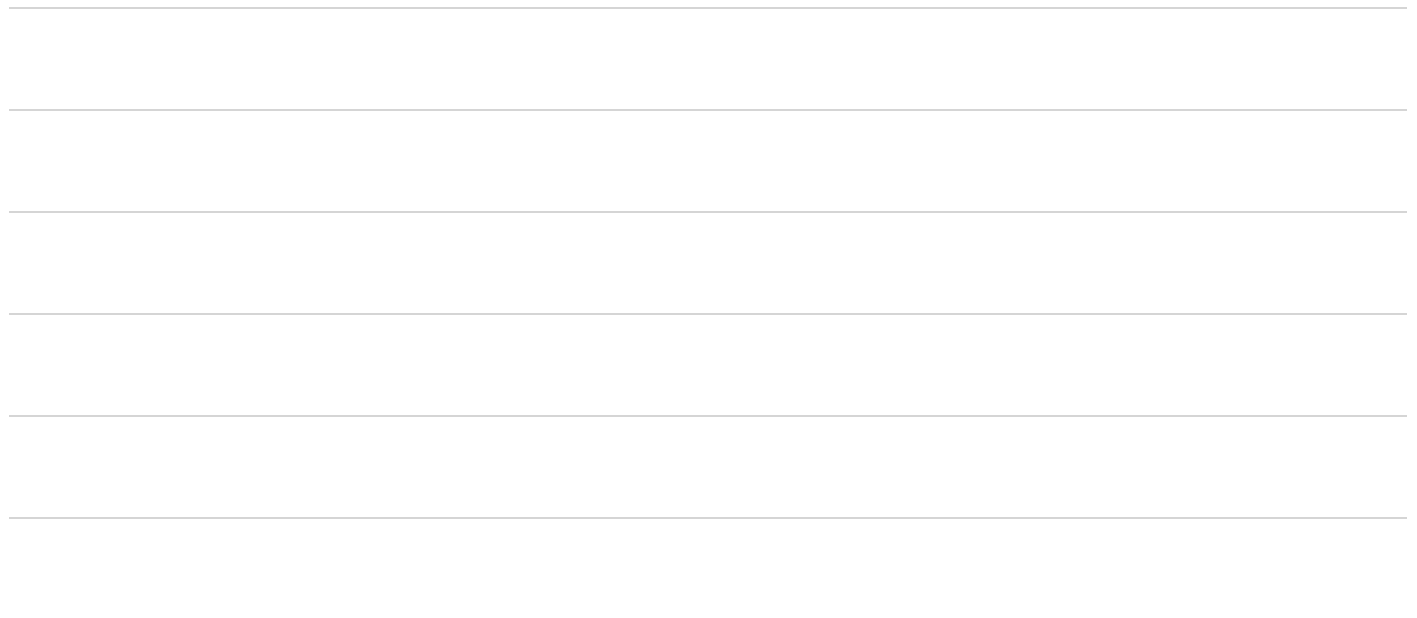
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