Chapter 1

Introducing Jane Austen

In This Chapter

- Understanding why Jane Austen is so popular
- Examining Austen's critical reception
- Appreciating the many ways Austen is celebrated

It's challenging to introduce someone who in a way "needs no introduction." Jane Austen isn't just the female writer from days gone by who writes love stories. Yet ironically (and Austen loved being ironic) she's the queen of the courtship novel and the originator of the *Regency romance* (courtship literature set specifically in England's Regency period, 1811–1820, during which Jane Austen actually lived, as opposed to authors today who write Regency romances, copying Jane Austen). She's a keen observer of her world (late-18th- and early-19th-century England), a subtle *satirist* (one who writes works that attempt to improve society or humanity), and a shrewd analyst of human behavior (a century before psychologists decided that observing human behavior was a reliable way to understand human beings).

Her small literary output of six major novels, two fragments of novels, about two dozen youthful pieces of fiction (later called her *Juvenilia*), and a *novella,* or short novel, is in inverse proportion to her popularity. Type her name into an Internet search engine, and within seconds you can explore nearly 13 million results. But reading a novel by Jane Austen is far more fun and enlightening than clicking through Internet Web sites. So, too, I hope, is reading this book.

Her novels are always selling. They inspire commercial films and television miniseries, as well as Broadway shows. Readers who can't get enough Austen buy dozens of sequels by authors who attempt to continue the events of her novels, which I believe she has already brought to closure. Her face, or the image that's believed to be an approximation of what she looked like, appears on tea mugs, T-shirts, computer mouse pads, and tote bags, prompting people who already own these items to buy more of the same items, but with Austen's face on them. Writers attach her name to dating guides, which always strikes me as ironic: Sure, guys have always been guys, but Austen's

characters didn't date as we understand dating. (You can find more about how young people got to know each other in Chapter 6.) Writers also attach the Austen name to cookbooks, tea books, decorating books — anything writers and publishers can relate to Jane Austen. That's because she's hot stuff today.

Identifying the Lady Writer

The current blog that "Austen's everywhere" would undoubtedly shock Austen because during her most productive writing years (1809–1816), even her readers didn't know her name. Her first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), appeared with the title page reading "By A Lady." And her second published novel was no help because *Pride and Prejudice* was published with the byline "By The Author Of *Sense and Sensibility*." You can guess how the bylines of her other novels read: "By The Author Of. . . ."

Do you see a pattern here? Being a lady meant more than being a courteous woman. A lady was a member of a social class called the *gentry.* This class owned land and was genteel. While some female (and note, I didn't write the word "lady" just now) novelists had their names in their bylines, they usually explained that they wrote because of financial distress — an ailing husband or wastrel husband with a brood of young children to support, and so forth. But a *lady* didn't write for money; she wrote for personal fulfillment — though Jane Austen enjoyed making the money, too! At the same time, the cryptic byline preserved her anonymity, which Austen desired. The byline identifying the author as a "Lady" also told the contemporary reader what to expect: a polite, well-mannered book with ladies and gentlemen as characters. And Austen didn't disappoint.

While Austen's identity as an author was leaking here and there, it was only after Austen's death at age 41 that the public finally discovered, through obituary notices, that Jane Austen was the "Lady" who wrote *Pride and Prejudice, Emma,* and so on. Her literary executor brother Henry prefaced a "Biographical Notice of the Author" with her name and the titles of her four previously published novels listed in the first paragraph to a two-volume set of her first and final completed novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion,* which were published together in January 1818. Finally her reading public knew her name.

Keeping a Personal Record

Just because Austen published anonymously didn't mean she didn't care about her books. On the contrary, she wrote letters that served as her personal thoughts about her works. In her letters she specifically called *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* her children. She kept lists of friends' and family members' comments about *Mansfield Park* and *Emma.* She happily reported in letters to family members when a novel was going into a second edition or when someone praised one of her books. Austen also wrote to her naval brother Frank, who was at sea, to proudly report earning a total of £250 from her writing, £140 of that from *Sense and Sensibility,* which had sold out its first edition, plus getting the copyright to it back (Letter, July 3–6, 1813). (For info on Austen's writing and publishing, head to Chapter 3.)

But Jane Austen wasn't a publicity seeker. In another letter to Frank written the following October, she told him that the "Secret" of her novel-writing was spreading. What's worse, their talkative brother Henry, hearing *Pride and Prejudice* praised while in Scotland, blabbed in a moment of fraternal affection that his sister was the author. "I am trying to harden myself," she writes to Frank. Saying this, she means she's trying to strengthen herself intellectually and emotionally to endure any publicity that follows.

Getting Reviewed

Austen found herself reviewed by not only the critics of her time, but also her family, friends, and future readers.

Checking out the comments from the critics of her day

During her productive, publishing years, Austen preferred life in her native county of Hampshire, surrounded by a loving family and dear friends of both genders. But her books were starting to get noticed by the critics.

- In February of 1812, *The Critical Review* printed an unsigned *Sense and Sensibility* review, which praised the book for showing well-drawn, natural characters in realistic events and presenting instructive morality.

- The May 1812 *British Critic*'s reviewers were even more flattering of Austen's work, saying that they thought so highly of *Sense and Sensibility* that they wished they had room among the major articles in that issue to discuss the book. Commending the novel for having believable and consistent characters, the review recommends the novel to female readers for its conduct lessons.

While these aren't rave reviews, they were certainly encouraging to an author who'd been writing since her adolescence and was now finally published at age 36.

The same publications as abovereviewed *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813. This time the reviews more fully praised Austen's work. Calling it the best novel they had seen recently, the *British Critic*'s reviewer loved the way the author wrote the character of Elizabeth Bennet and praised the novel's energy. The review concludes by encouraging the author to continue writing — which she, in fact, was. Austen completed *Mansfield Park,* while her publishers issued second editions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* — all by the end of 1813. *The Critical Review* opened its evaluation of *Pride and Prejudice* noting that the author presented an entire family that interested the reader, and echoing the *British Critic* by calling this novel the best of any they'd recently seen that dealt with familiar, home life.

Commenting on the early reviewers

The two journals that reviewed Austen's first two published novels used the typical criteria for literary evaluation: the book's morality and probability. Today, Austen's work is considered realistic. That is, her characters represent human nature, which is always the same. Thus, the controlling Lady Catherine, the jealous Miss Bingley, and the manipulative Lucy Steele are all familiar because at one time or another, you've met someone who behaves just like they do. But Austen's characters aren't types; they're neither flat nor one dimensional. Each person is unique. So, while *Pride and Prejudice*'s Miss Bingley is jealous of Elizabeth, her jealousy manifests itself very differently from *Sense and Sensibility*'s Lucy Steele's jealousy of Elinor. Today Austen's novels may be called psychologically realistic, which is why readers of the present can relate and respond to characters created in 1812.

Getting the big review for Emma

While Austen's anonymous reviews in 1812 and 1813 were from respectable publications, getting a review of *Emma* by Sir Walter Scott, the most famous novelist and poet of the day, in the *Quarterly Review* (1815) was a real coup. Even though *Emma*'s publisher, John Murray, requested Scott to review the novel, Murray, the really big-time publisher of the period, did so because he knew he had something new, special, and unique in *Emma.*

Scott used the review to talk about the development of the novel, which was a comparatively new *genre* (form of writing). Noting that while recent novelists such as Henry Fielding *(Tom Jones)* and Fanny Burney *(Cecilia)* had been realistic and set characters in ordinary life, they still had extreme, unrealistic moments such as sword fights, dramatic illnesses, or the specter of poverty and ruin hanging over their characters. More recent novels had tried to be truer to everyday life, but they still found their excitement in well-worn ways such as heroic feats or excessive sentimentality. But then there was *Emma.* Scott praises *Emma*'s author (remember, he never heard the name "Jane Austen") for presenting original and spirited characters and actions while remaining within the boundaries of ordinary life — in other words, the book does not depend on heroic sword fights or dramatic illnesses to hold the reader's interest or arouse the reader's excitement. In accomplishing this, Scott said, the author of *Emma* was unique, or nearly so.

While there is much about Austen's work that Scott doesn't recognize, his high praise of *Emma* shows that he sees the writer's talent for doing something new in the novel form.

Glancing at later reviews

The important mid-19th-century critic, George Lewes, observed in 1859 that Austen's novels continued to be read, while many authors of her own day who surpassed her in reader-popularity had become neglected. (In other words, she was slowly becoming a classic in the sense that she was a writer whose works were outliving their author.) Lewes also praised Austen's artistic economy: She never wastes a word. But he also claimed that Austen was for the more "cultivated" reader. (La-de-dah!) This statement led to a certain snobbery because it suggested that you needed to be especially refined to read and appreciate Austen. By the later 19th century, some critics pointed to Austen's limitations, such as her not including showy scenes of great events, for which Scott had praised *Emma.* They complained, for example, that while she lived in the age of the Napoleonic Wars, she never really dealt with them. It would take later 20th-century critics to see all that is subtle in Austen: that she does deal with politics, social change, economics, and so forth. Likewise, modern critics fully recognized that perhaps Austen's greatest achievement was taking the incidents of everyday life, with which readers can identify, and treating them with humor, irony, sensitivity, and *élan* — a favorite word and desirable trait of Austen's meaning distinctive style or flair. Isn't her combination of realism, wit, and style the big reason that people still read Austen today?

Listening to Austen's current readers

Although Austen's novels inspire shelves of critical analysis by literary scholars, her main readership comprises people who don't pick up her novels professionally. They read Austen because they love her novels and find her work meaningful.

Between October and December 2003, BBC-2 television in England ran a reader's poll throughout the United Kingdom called "The Big Read." The goal was to determine the reading (and obviously TV-viewing) public's favorite 100 books of all time. Austen had three in the top 100, and she came in second overall with *Pride and Prejudice.* And what was number one? *The Lord of the Rings,* which was playing to box-office records in movie theaters just at the time of the poll. Now, I'm not saying "coincidence," but . . . to give you an idea of how the voting went, other titles in the top 21 were *Gone with the Wind, Winnie the Pooh,* and *The Wind in the Willows.* I'd speculate that of the five titles, Austen's is the only one that turns up regularly on college reading lists, unless you take a "kiddie lit" class. So regular folks who watch TV, enter polls, and read voted for *Pride and Prejudice.*

The following year, 2004, BBC-Radio 4's "Woman's Hour" ran a poll to determine the novel that women can relate to the most. Ninety-three percent of the respondents, presumably all female who listen to the show, named *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) as the book that not only maintains its relevance to them but also makes them proud to be women. (I love the Brits for doing these polls! They take reading seriously and popularly over there.)

The two polls point out that ordinary readers read Austen without being assigned it by a teacher — even though teachers and professors assign it for its literary value, too. Austen is a writer who inspires countless doctoral dissertations, as well as bumper stickers that proclaim, "I'd Rather Be Reading Jane Austen." Why? Keep reading to find out — and see if your reason for preferring to read Austen's works match those I suggest!

Getting Comfortable with "Jane"

For many Austen fans, reading one of her novels is taking an armchair vacation back to England in the early 1800s, known as the Regency. They see this period as a time of tea and etiquette. The Austen who conjures up such ideas may even inspire people to take up Regency dancing and Regency fashion. This is when Austen, the novelist, becomes to her readers "Jane," their friend. (For details on the Regency, go to Chapter 2.)

Hearing the friendly, welcoming narrator

Readers may love Dickens, but I never hear Dickens's fans calling him "Charles." Yet Austen fans easily call Austen "Jane." Jane is that wonderfully witty, wise, and well-spoken narrator who's a friendly and welcome companion as you read the novel.

For example, in Austen's early, frustrated attempt at getting published, the narrator in *Northanger Abbey* tells you of the marriage of the lovely and charming Eleanor Tilney to a presumably equally lovely and charming young Viscount, who never appears in the novel, but whose laundry lists do appear from Catherine Morland's snooping. Listen to the narrator:

> My own joy on the occasion is very sincere. . . . [Eleanor's] husband was really very deserving of her; independent of his peerage, his wealth, and his attachment, being to a precision the most charming young man in the world. *Any* further definition of his merits must be unnecessary; the most charming young man in the world is instantly before the imagination of us all. (NA 2:16)

The narrative voice you've just heard is attractive; it invited you into the book by saying "us all." Keep in mind the obvious — that it's only in a novel that you encounter a narrator in whose company you read for hundreds of pages. Can you point to a narrator who's more lovely and charming than Austen?

Hearing "Jane, the friend" become the witty, terse narrator

Sometimes, however, "Jane, the friend" gets a little terse, but never with the reader. Instead, Austen uses her characters as the butts of her jokes. For example, in *Persuasion,* she sets up a conversation between Mrs. Musgrove and Mrs. Croft. Mrs. Musgrove exclaims to her new friend, "'What a great traveler you must have been!'" and Mrs. Croft replies:

> Pretty well, ma'am, in the fifteen years of my marriage. I have crossed the Atlantic four times, and have been more than once to the East Indies and back again . . . But I never went beyond the Streights — and never was in the West Indies. We do not call Bermuda or Bahama, you know, the West Indies. (P 1:8)

Now "Jane," the narrative voice, enters: "Mrs. Musgrove had not a word to say in dissent; *she* could not accuse herself of having ever called them anything in the whole course of her life." So much for Mrs. Musgrove's knowledge of geography! Although this narrative voice sounds like it has quite a little bite to it, remember that in *Pride and Prejudice,* Mr. Bennet's delightful sarcasm has to come from someone. And that someone, of course, is Austen.

The sarcasm that appears in the narrator's quip about Mrs. Musgrove's ignorance of geography and throughout Mr. Bennet's speech first appeared coming from Austen, herself, in the first full publication of her remaining letters in 1932 under the editorship of R. W. Chapman. These letters reveal an Austen who could be cynical, nasty, cruel, and sarcastic. Here are some examples:

> Mrs. Hall, of Sherborne, was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing to a fright. I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband. (October 27, 1798)

Poor Mr. Hall: He's now down in history as having such a frightening face that his wife's glancing at him caused her to immediately bear a premature dead baby.

She was only 22 when she wrote that. But she didn't soften with age. Here she is at 32:

> Only think of Mrs. Holder's being dead! — Poor woman, she has done the only thing in the world she could possibly do to make one cease to abuse her! (October 14, 1813)

Not only does Austen make jokes about dead babies, but about dead ladies, too! And even in speaking of Mrs. Holder's death, Austen shows neither kindness nor sympathy for the recently deceased.

Delivering the Hollywood goods

The same "Jane, the friend" who attracts armchair travelers to read and imaginatively travel back to "Jolly Olde England," also attracts filmgoers and television viewers and thus film and TV producers.

Austen's novels offer characters and events in lovely English settings with the people dressed in attractive costumes of a previous era. How comforting to get away from life's daily hassles with such well-dressed characters and charming settings! But her novels provide comfort in another way: by presenting logical stories, where all the loose ends are tied up at the end.

Logic is very comforting in an increasingly complex and often irrational world. Logic of this type — where everything is explained — is what makes television criminal investigation shows popular. Think about it: Character relationships on these shows are made secondary to solving the crime through the use of sophisticated scientific apparatus and forensic medical tests that uncover the guilty party. The solution of the crime returns temporary order to a disordered world. This is satisfying to the TV viewer.

What does a logically-presented story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, do? It appeals to the natural human desire for answers, for security, for assuredness. And what does an Austen novel do? *Emma,* for example, provides a thought-provoking plot with a surprise at the end, rendered through interesting and articulate (except for poor Harriet!) characters, dressed in lovely Regency attire. A second reading reveals that all the clues to the surprise were there in the book all along. But in following Emma's thinking, which was wrong, you were led down the wrong path. And there's no need for even a finger-print test, though Frank Churchill's distracting Emma from her Weymouth questions by calling her attention to Ford's Store and going inside to buy new gloves certainly covers his romantic handiwork. The surprise is explained at the end of the novel. Emma was "duped." But she's wiser (or at least you hope so) and better for it.

Austen tells such a good story in *Pride and Prejudice,* where Elizabeth and Darcy begin as verbal sparring partners, that this novel, along with Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedick of *Much Ado About Nothing*, provides the DNA for all those movies about antagonistic lovers who finally realize they belong together. Whether it's Tracy versus Hepburn or Jean Arthur versus Cary Grant, Austen's presence (and okay, Shakespeare's, too!) is hovering over the scene. And of course, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones* books and films are directly indebted to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* — though Fielding's Bridget lacks all the self-possession, wit, and smarts of Elizabeth Bennet. Indeed, poor Bridget makes *Emma*'s Harriet Smith look like she's ready for rocket science!

Going back to Hollywood

Austen's attention to details makes her novels great sources for scripts. With her ear for conversational voice and the words she gives to a voice, the script writer can borrow pages of dialogue from the novel. Granted, the adapter must frequently add extra little scenes here and there to explain the story line. But the original dialogue is so right for the characters that it is not unusual to hear from the screen the exact, or almost the exact, words written in the novel.

Observing with Austen

Flip ahead to Chapter 3, and study Cassandra Austen's sketch of Jane Austen. Notice how sharp her eyes look and see her look of determination. But wait! There's something else. Her eyes aren't looking at the artist (her sister) but over her right shoulder. What could she be looking at or listening for? Whatever "it" is, "it" has her attention, and this portrait captures the astute observer that Jane Ascent was. No matter what she was doing, she was taking in all the little details of the world around her. Austen then used those details to masterfully write her novels, and those details make reading about her characters fun and insightful.

Writing dialogue and conversation

The observant Austen is a writer of witty dialogues that are the specialty of her novels. Each character's speech seems to match him or her perfectly. Austen puts those characters in conversations that you overhear in the reading. By doing this, she enables her readers to come to know the characters of her novels in the same way you know people in real life: by listening to what they say and picking up on how they say it. Sections of her novels read like little plays; for example, when Darcy, Bingley, Miss Bingley, and Elizabeth converse in *Pride and Prejudice* (PP 1:10), the pages of their conversation look almost like a script for a play. Even the first page of the same novel, with Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in dialogue, is filled with conversation, allowing the readers to make first impressions of the couple.

Putting Mark Twain and Jane Austen in the same paragraph

When Mark Twain was traveling on his lecture circuit, he was asked by a budding writer how to make characters seem real. Twain answered, "Don't say, 'The old lady screamed.' Just bring her on and let her scream." In other words, Twain was advocating writing dramatically, showing the story as much as possible through dialogue, instead of just telling the events. Austen does the same thing. So why should I warn you that I'm putting Twain and Austen in the same paragraph? Twain was notorious for making disparaging remarks about Jane Austen. For example, he said, "Every time I read *Pride and Prejudice,* I want to dig her up and hit her over the head with her own shin bone." *Every time* he reads *Pride and Prejudice*? What's wrong with this picture? How many times has he read the book, and if he hates it so much, why does he keep reading it? I would guess that, actually, Twain liked Austen. He made those nasty Austen jokes to annoy his great friend, the novelist William Dean Howells, who praised Austen's writing skills frequently and enthusiastically.

Having an ear for a character's voice

Showing the character in action, instead of telling the reader about the character, makes that character vivid. Austen lets her characters speak for themselves. For example, look at *Pride and Prejudice.* In the drawing room at Rosings, Elizabeth Bennet and Colonel Fitzwilliam are talking as they're seated at the pianoforte across the room from Lady Catherine. Lady Catherine abruptly interrupts them and calls out:

> What is it you are saying, Fitzwilliam? What is it you are talking of? What are you telling Miss Bennet? Let me hear what it is. [Fitzwilliam replies] We are talking of music, Madam. [Lady Catherine exclaims] Of music! Then pray, speak aloud. It is of all subjects my delight. I must have my share in the conversation, if you are speaking of music. There are few people in England, I suppose, who have a more true enjoyment of music than myself, or a better natural taste. If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient. (PP 2:8)

Even if you've never opened *Pride and Prejudice,* you know what Lady Catherine is like from this brief excerpt of her speech: rude, arrogant, selfish, controlling, egocentric. You know all that without Austen saying "Lady Catherine is rude, arrogant, selfish, controlling, and egocentric." Austen shows Lady Catherine's personality through the action of the character.

Having an eye for details

Austen's observational skills and her eye for details give the readers characters who are as multifaceted as any of you are today. Here are a few examples:

- Within a page or two of *Emma,* the heroine can be helpful, conniving, and snide.
- In writing the jealous and ignorant Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility,* Austen slips grammatical errors into her speech — not a lot, just enough to remind the reader that Lucy is no lady.
- Austen mentions Lucy's eyes several times, in order to suggest to the reader how closely and uncomfortably Lucy is scrutinizing Elinor.

Going onstage with Austen

Austen is everywhere — even off-Broadway. Chapter 15 provides details about the many screen and stage adaptations of Austen's novels, but at the time of this writing, a musical, "I Love You Because," very loosely based on *Pride and Prejudice,* is playing off-Broadway. The hero's name is Austin Bennet; his new girlfriend is Marcy Fitzwilliams (in the novel, the hero's full name is Fitzwilliam Darcy), and the girlfriend's best friend is Diana Bingley. The point of the show is advertised as "how to love someone because of his or her differences."

Tracing Austen's Popularity

Austen is now so popular that even non-novel readers recognize the name from seeing it in various, unexpected places like tea mugs and dating guides. Her immediate Regency siblings and her future Victorian collateral descendants would faint at seeing their sister and aunt depicted like this. For they presented her as a near saint. But Austen has also stepped off the pedestal into the trenches of World War I and classrooms ranging from high school to post-doctoral school seminars.

Starting the Saint Jane myth

When Henry Austen wrote his biography of his sister for the posthumous publications of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion,* he presented a woman ready for sainthood:

> Faultless herself, as nearly as human nature can be, she always sought, in the faults of others, something to excuse, to forgive or forget. Where extenuation was impossible, she had a sure refuge in silence. She never uttered either a hasty, a silly, or a severe expression . . . She was thoroughly religious and devout; fearful of giving offence to God, and incapable of feeling it toward any fellow creature. . . .

Henry's notice, of course, is understandably influenced by his feelings of loss over his 41-year-old sister. Henry also had recently become a clergyman of the Anglican Evangelical persuasion, so this recent career move certainly affected his decision to write of his sister's religious devotion.

But imagine the shock when the edition of her letters came out in 1932. Here's another Austen one-liner from a letter that completely undercuts Henry's "incapable of feeling offence" line: "I do not want people to be very

agreeable, as it saves me the trouble of liking them a great deal" (Letter, December 24, 1798). Yet 1932 was still a long way from 1818 when Henry wrote the biographical notice. And so the Austens had time to perpetuate "Saint Jane."

Victorianizing Jane Austen

Austen's next biographer was a beloved nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh. By the time he published *A Memoir of Jane Austen* in December of 1869 (though dated as 1870 on the title page), he was a mutton-chopped Victorian. And so it's not surprising that he presented this type of Aunt Jane to the world with the help of his two sisters; all three of them, the children of Jane Austen's eldest brother James, knew their aunt well and still remembered her.

The *Memoir* opens by saying that Austen's life was "singularly barren" of events. This portrayal doesn't look too promising! And because the Victorian mindset is one of silence and coverup, the *Memoir* proceeds accordingly. Not that Austen has anything to hide. But the *Memoir* presents Aunt Jane as a simple woman who had "genius" and lived a happy Christian life without complexity. The sarcasm, cynicism, and satire that you've seen in her letters and even seen in some of her fiction are all missing. Nevertheless, the *Memoir* satisfied the appetites of a new generation of Austen readers for information on the author's life. And it boosted Austen's popularity!

Taking Austen to the trenches

In 1894, the English critic George Saintsbury coined the word "Janeite" to mean an enthusiastic admirer of Austen's works. But Rudyard Kipling popularized the term in a short story called "The Janeites," first published in 1924. Written in heavy cockney slang, the story isn't the easiest text in the world to read. But it's worth the effort. Here's the story in summary:

> Soon after WWI, the story's narrator goes to a Masonic lodge on cleaning day. One of the cleaners is Humberstall who'd been wounded in the head but who still returned to the western front as assistant mess waiter for his old Heavy Artillery platoon. A simple and uneducated man, he tries to explain how his boss, the senior mess waiter, was able to talk with the university-educated officers on equal ground because of their shared love of Jane Austen's novels. Humberstall is coached on the novels and is led to think that the Austen readers, or Janeites, are all members of a Masonic-like secret society. They scratch the names of Austen characters on the guns. Then all but Humberstall are killed by a hail of gunfire. When he

quotes *Emma* to a nurse, another secret Janeite, she saves his life by getting him on the hospital train back to England. Humberstall still reads Austen's novels as they remind him of his comrades back in the trenches. "There's no one to match Jane when you're in a tight place," he says, noting the comfort her novels provide. Yet her comfort isn't all healing, for as the other Masonic Lodge cleaner notes, Humberstall's mother has to come and take him home from the Lodge because he gets "fits."

WWI soldiers agreed that while they were overseas in the war, reading Austen was an effective mental escape from gas masks and bayonets. The Army Medical Corps advised shell-shocked soldiers to read Austen for the books' soothing effects. Supposedly, Mr. and Mrs. Rudyard Kipling found comfort in Austen's novels, which they read to each other after their son was killed in 1914 in WWI.

Taking Austen to school

Austen's novels became continuously available since 1833, when England's Bentley Standard Novel Series produced affordable editions of her works. In 1923, R. W. Chapman's edition of Austen's novels was published by Oxford University Press. This scholarly edition is one of the earliest of the works of any English novelist. While Austen had readership popularity before, she now had academic distinction. Scholars began to pay serious attention to her novels, proceeding with literary analyses. Austen's use of irony was especially appealing to American academic critics writing just after WWII because analyzing her verbal irony made use of a popular new critical approach that treated the text as an object in itself and studied that text in terms of how the author used language.

A study in 1997–1998 by the National Association of Scholars showed that in the 1964–1965 academic year, 25 liberal arts colleges surveyed in the United States still had no courses that cited Jane Austen in their catalogs. When those same schools were surveyed in the 1997–1998 academic year, however, Austen had moved into third place, just behind those old standbys Shakespeare and Chaucer. Austen's appearance in college catalogs' course descriptions is likely the result of the Women's Movement and the expansion of the *canon* (literary texts that authorities consider as the best representatives of their times). For along with Austen on the 1997–1998 lists were Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, Emily Dickinson, George Eliot, and Zora Neale Hurston. In the earlier list, no female writers were listed.

Translating Austen from English

Austen's novels began to be translated as early as 1813, with *Pride and Prejudice* going into French during the same year the book appeared in England. Within 11 years, all of her novels were available in French. But France hasn't quite caught the Austen craze like the United States and England. And one reason may be that the French found some of her characters alien to their culture. For example, the French found Elizabeth's behavior impertinent and unladylike. So in the French translations of *Pride and Prejudice,* the French read about a different Elizabeth Bennet than their English-speaking counterparts. Her character was changed. Be that as it may, Austen's novels have since been translated into Swedish, German, Russian, Arabic, Dutch, Greek, Hebrew, Japanese, Chinese, Italian, Persian, Polish, and numerous other languages. But like the French suppression of Elizabeth's sassiness, the translations may also make the female characters more in tune with the local culture. If you're interested in tracing translations, check out David Gilson's *A Bibliography of Jane Austen* (Winchester, 1997).

Becoming Today's Janeite

In 1940, the Jane Austen society of the UK was formed; sister societies appeared as The Jane Austen Society of North America (1979) and The Jane Austen Society of Australia (1988), as well as societies in non-English-speaking countries. The study of the so-called "cult" of Jane has become fashionable among academics who sometimes criticize the societies. But most members are not cult-creatures. They simply enjoy getting together to discuss and learn about Jane Austen. Yes, some of our members dress in Regency attire, but that's not a requirement of membership. Dressing up (or not!) and sipping tea are little harmless delights and escapes from the pressures of everyday life.

The Jane Austen Society of North America (JASNA), a nonprofit organization, can be accessed via the Internet at `www.jasna.org`. Over 60 regional groups offer periodic meetings, book groups, and related activities around the United States and Canada. Membership fees are reasonable and cover the production and mailing of three 32-page newsletters annually and an annual journal of Austen-related articles. The Society is run by volunteers, with the exception of a professional data bank manager. Students are welcome and have a reduced membership fee.

Jane Austen is so popular today that there are many ways to enjoy her after you've read and re-read the books and seen the films and television series:

- Take one of the many Jane Austen tours through Hampshire, England, which advertises itself as "Jane Austen Country."
- Visit the house in Chawton where Austen lived for the final eight years of her life. It's now a museum run by the Jane Austen Memorial Trust. Chapter 19 provides instructions on how to get there, plus its Web address.
- Buy or borrow from a library *The Jane Austen Cookbook* and create with friends and family a complete Jane Austen meal. Chapter 18 tells you about *The Jane Austen Cookbook*.
- Start a book club devoted to Jane Austen, and after you've read all of Austen, read Karen Joy Fowler's novel, *The Jane Austen Book Club.*
- As you read other novels, keep a list of how many times Jane Austen or one of her novels is mentioned casually. I was reading a mystery book last week in which one of the detectives saw an Austen novel in a room. I mentioned it to a friend who said she had noticed Austen's name popping up in many other novels.
- Encourage your school or local theater group to do a play based on an Austen novel. Chapter 15 gives you a start on finding such plays. Or have a class or another group write their own play. It can even be performed without costumes and settings in a reader's theater format.
- In 2005, Chicago picked *Pride and Prejudice* for its "One City, One Book" event. As President of the Jane Austen Society of North America, I had the privilege of speaking at the Chicago Public Library about Austen and the novel. Debates, discussions, and other events occurred in venues all over the city. Libraries offered the novel in numerous translations. Encourage your local leaders to do "One City, One Book," using an Austen novel.
- Schools have Jane Austen Days, when classes study the novels and students prepare food from Austen's time and dress in period costume.

Indeed, you may seem to be in a Jane Austen *daze,* but that's not so bad, is it?