

THE
JANE AUSTEN
POCKET BIBLE

EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW
ABOUT JANE AND HER NOVELS



HOLLY IVINS

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BIBLES

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Holly Ivins

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INTRODUCTION

'I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of anything than of a book!' Pride and Prejudice (1813)

'It is a truth universally acknowledged ...' that Jane Austen is one of the most beloved novelists in the English language. Her novels have never been out of print since their publication in the 19th century and there have been innumerable adaptations of her novels in both film and television. That doesn't make her novels any less intimidating to approach for the first time reader though, or even for the avowed fan to get to grips with the nitty gritty details.

This book is here to help. For those who have never entered the world of Miss Austen, this book will be a guide to help navigate through the ironic turn of phrase, the love triangles and the bonnets. For those self-confessed 'Janeites', there are fun facts about the novels as well as a different look at the love and romance found within the pages of the novels. This book will help you learn more about the lady herself, her life, and the world she lived in: all adding to your understanding of these great works of fiction.

By the end of this Pocket Bible you should be able to approach these novels as old friends, not intimidating classical tomes. You should be able to read these beloved classics and understand the intriguing storylines as well as the social commentary and the delightful literary art which Austen employs.

1

'Life seems but a quick succession of busy nothings': Biography

You may already know everything there is to know about Mr Darcy, Emma Woodhouse and Catherine Morland, or you may still be trying to figure out which Bennet sister is which, but how much do you know about the woman who created these memorable characters? This chapter is a brief look at Jane's life, including details on how she wrote her novels, in the hope that by becoming better acquainted with the author, you will become better acquainted with her work.

TIMELINE OF JANE AUSTEN'S LIFE

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD (1775-1801)

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775 at the Steventon rectory in Hampshire; she was the seventh child for the Austen family, followed only by her brother Charles. She had six brothers and one sister, Cassandra, whom she was extremely close to (see [here](#) for more on Jane's family). Jane's father was the reverend at Steventon rectory and her mother, an intelligent and sensible woman, ran the household, caring for her own children as well as the boys who boarded at their house and were educated by Mr Austen.

After her christening on 5 April 1776 Jane was sent to live with and be nursed by a nearby farmer's wife, Elizabeth

Littlewood. Although this may seem cruel, it was exactly the same treatment as her siblings had experienced in their infancy. Mrs Austen simply didn't have time to look after five boys and an infant as well as running her household. Jane's family often visited her though, and the young Austen returned to live with them when she was about two or three years old.

Jane spent a happy childhood at Steventon, full of reading and long country walks. She was apparently a tomboy as a child, preferring to play cricket and roll down hills with her brothers than play 'girls' games', much like the character of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. The Austen house was a full one with eight children, and an additional four or five boys who lived there to be educated by Jane's father.

Pocket Fact

Jane's brother Henry remembered that Jane began reading at a very young age and that she had a 'tenacious memory'.

The Austen family

Father: Reverend George Austen (1731-1805)

Jane's father won a scholarship to St John's College, Oxford and while there he was known as 'The Handsome Proctor'. George greatly encouraged Jane's writing, buying her her first notebooks to write in, and even approaching a publisher for her with her early draft of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Mother: Cassandra Austen (née Leigh) (1739-1827)

Cassandra Leigh's uncle was a master at Balliol College and it was while visiting this uncle that Cassandra met

George Austen. They were married in 1764 and Cassandra went on to have eight children, run a household, care for the school boys who boarded in the house, and even write poetry.

Siblings: James Austen (1765-1819)

James was the eldest son of the Austen family, and became rector of Steventon after his father retired. James' children Anne and James-Edward are responsible for most of the biographical information we have about Jane.

George Austen (1766-1838)

George was named after his father but he did not live with the Austens as he suffered from epilepsy, living instead with neighbours in Steventon. There is evidence to suggest George may have been deaf as Jane makes reference to the fact that she was fluent in 'finger speaking'. Not a lot of information has survived about George, and he and Jane are the only members of the Austen family who did not have an official portrait taken.

Edward Austen (1767-1852)

As a child Edward was adopted by Thomas Knight, Mr Austen's wealthy cousin, and after taking the surname Knight went on to inherit several estates, including Godmersham.

Henry Austen (1771-1850)

Henry was Jane's favourite brother, often acting as her representative with publishers in London. Henry enjoyed a varied career as an army agent in the militia, a banker, and eventually as a country curate. He married the Austens' cousin Eliza de Feuillide and they lived together in London. It was Henry who prepared *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* for publication after Jane's death.

Cassandra Elizabeth Austen (1773-1845)

Cassandra was Jane's best friend and the sisters lived together for the entirety of Jane's life. Their mother even said 'if Cassandra's head had been going to be cut off, Jane would have hers cut off too'. When Jane died Cassandra said 'She was the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow. I had not a thought concealed from her, and it is as if I had lost part of myself.' In the brief periods they were apart the sisters wrote to each other frequently and there are about 100 surviving letters. There are no letters from Jane before the age of 20 though as Cassandra destroyed the majority of her sister's letters after Jane's death. Although Cassandra destroyed most of Jane's letters she is responsible for passing on her sister's legacy to her nephews and nieces, and also produced the only two portraits we have of Jane.

Jane's letters

If you want to get a sense of what Jane Austen was really like, try reading her letters. There are several collections available and they all give a brilliant insight into the author's scathing wit and ironic view of the world.

Francis Austen (1774-1865)

Francis was known affectionately as Frank or 'Fly' by his family and at the age of 12 he went to Portsmouth to join the Naval Academy. He went on to become the Admiral of the Fleet in 1863 and even received a knighthood. It was Frank's second wife Martha who wrote *The Jane Austen Household Book*.

Charles Austen (1779-1852)

Charles was the youngest in the Austen family and also joined the navy at age 12. He was made an Admiral in 1846

and gave Jane a topaz cross, a gesture Jane inserted into *Mansfield Park* when William gives Fanny a cross when he returns from sea.

Reading in the Austen household

The Austens were a family of great readers and Jane started writing at the age of 12. The work she produced in this period (between the ages of 12 and 18) is referred to as her *Juvenilia* (see [here](#) for more on this). Jane's early motivation was to write short pieces of fiction as gifts for her family and she would often read her work aloud to her family in the evenings. Cassandra recalled Jane reading *Elinor and Marianne* to the family before 1796 as well as an early draft of *Pride and Prejudice*, both of which were 'established favourites'. The Austen household has been described as one full of intellectual discussion and Jane's father encouraged her writing and guided her in her reading.

Pocket Fact

Mr Austen's bookcase covered 64 square feet of wall in the Steventon rectory, full of both classical works and new novels.

Jane's education

Jane's formal education began at boarding school with her sister. The girls went to Mrs Cawley's school in Oxford when Jane was aged seven. This turned out to be a disaster, as an outbreak of typhus nearly killed both girls. Luckily their parents brought them home and nursed them back to health. Later in 1785, the 10-year-old Jane was sent to the Abbey School in Reading (or rather she insisted on going with Cassandra). This school was run by Madame la Tournelle, a kind woman who taught the girls sewing and

spelling. Jane was happy during her time here, and Mrs Goddard's boarding school in *Emma* seems to have been based on the Abbey School.

Pocket Fact

*Jane was not the only writer in the Austen family. Her mother wrote many poems during her lifetime, and also wrote some scathing accounts of their neighbours, a sarcastic wit she clearly passed on to Jane. James Austen produced a magazine called *The Loiterer* which was published in London, Birmingham, Bath, Reading and Oxford. Henry Austen also contributed articles to this magazine.*

Jane's social life

At home, Jane put on plays with her brothers and sister, much as the Bertram family do in *Mansfield Park*. The family normally preferred comedies such as Sheridan's *The Rivals* but in 1788 they staged a more elaborate production with the help of Jane's sophisticated older cousin Eliza de Feuillide (see [here](#)).

Jane enjoyed a full social life at Steventon, attending dances at the Assembly Rooms in Basingstoke, as well as attending private balls at Manydown, the large country estate of family friends, the Biggs. Jane also enjoyed trips to London during this time, to visit her brother Henry.

Pocket Fact

The Assembly Rooms in Basingstoke where Jane attended dances is now a Barclays bank, bearing a plaque stating that Jane danced there.

It was during this time that Jane met Tom Lefroy, one of the

men she is thought to have been romantically involved with. See Chapter 7 for more on Jane's own romantic adventures.

In 1800 Jane's father, now aged 70, decided to retire. When he announced this news, along with the revelation that they would have to leave the rectory and move to Bath, it is said that Jane fainted.

What she wrote during this time

Between 1787 and 1793 Jane worked on what is now known as her *Juvenilia*. She spent a great deal of time revising these works and copied 29 different works into three notebooks. These notebooks included *Love and Freindship* [sic] a satire of the sensibility novels which were popular at the time. She also penned her version of *The History of England*, a 34 page manuscript illustrated with watercolours by Cassandra. This history was another satire, this time parodying the historical writing popular at the time, such as *The History of England* by Oliver Goldsmith. In 1793 Jane began work on a play called *Sir Charles Grandison*, which she temporarily abandoned but finished in 1800.

Pocket Fact

Some of Jane's earliest encouragement for her writing came from her neighbour Anne Lefroy, or Madame Lefroy as she was known. Anne was a lively and intelligent woman who was a great reader of Milton, Pope and Shakespeare, and was even known to write poetry herself. Incidentally, Madame Lefroy was also the aunt of Tom Lefroy, Jane's childhood sweetheart.

At this time (1795—1799) Jane also began work on early versions of her novels: *Elinor and Marianne* would later become *Sense and Sensibility*, *First Impressions* was the

foundation of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Susan* was an early draft of *Northanger Abbey*. Between 1793 and 1795 Jane worked on her most ambitious work to date, *Lady Susan*, which she completed in 1803. This work differs greatly from Jane's other writing, depicting an older heroine, a sexual predator, who uses her intelligence and charm to manipulate those around her (see [here](#) for more on this novel).

In 1797 Jane's father approached a publisher in London, Thomas Cadell, to see if he would consider publishing *First Impressions*, which George Austen described as 'a Manuscript Novel, comprised in three Vols. about the length of Miss Burney's *Evelina*'. The letter was returned though, marked 'declined by return of post'. Jane then returned to working on *Elinor and Marianne* from 1797 to 1798, removing the epistolary format and drafting it into the more familiar *Sense and Sensibility*.

In 1789 it is believed that Jane decided to try and write professionally, although in his autobiographical notice Jane's brother Henry was careful to point out that 'she became an authoress entirely from taste and inclination. Neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives.' However, this statement seems to have been born out of the building of the myth of 'Saint Jane', which the author's family perpetuated after her death. Jane in fact was very conscious of the commercial success of her books, and was always aware of her profits and copyright earnings, as a letter to her brother Frank discussing her earnings from *Sense and Sensibility* shows: 'I have now therefore written myself into £250 - which only makes me long for more.'

BATH (1801-1806)

In 1801 Jane, Cassandra and their parents arrived in Bath

(her brothers had all left home by this time). Although Jane preferred her quiet country life in Steventon she did have an active social life in Bath.

While living in Bath the family would go on trips to the seaside in Dorset and Lyme Regis. It was while in Lyme Regis that Jane is said to have had a mysterious romantic encounter with a young man who was very taken with her, but who tragically died before their relationship could develop. It was also during this period of her life in 1802 that Jane received her only proposal of marriage. (For more on Jane's love life see Chapter 7).

In 1805 Jane's father died suddenly after a short illness. This left Jane, her mother and Cassandra in a precarious financial situation. The women now had only a very small allowance which had to be supplemented by Jane's brothers, coming to a total of only £450 a year (a combined household income comparable to about £32,000 now). Considering that in 1807 Jane's budget for the entire year was just £50 (from which she had to buy clothes, send letters, and entertain herself among other things) it is easy to see that this money didn't go very far to support three women with no other means of income. The women remained in rented accommodation in Bath, and were joined by Jane's sister-in-law Martha in 1805.

What she wrote during this time

Jane did very little writing during her time in Bath. She managed to sell her manuscript *Susan* (now called *Northanger Abbey*) to a publisher for £10 (about £718 now) but the book was never published. Jane also began work on a novel called *The Watsons* (see [here](#)) but soon abandoned it after the death of her father.

Some people have argued that while she was living in Bath Jane was too depressed to write; others that she was simply

too busy. Whatever the reason this period was certainly the least productive for Jane's writing.

SOUTHAMPTON AND GODMERSHAM (1805-1808)

The period between 1805 and 1808 was a tumultuous time for Jane as she, her mother and sister moved between family members, staying where they could. In 1806 some relief from this nomadic lifestyle came when Jane's brother Frank invited the women to come and live with him and his new wife in Southampton. Jane was pleased to leave Bath and Southampton also had the added advantage of being near Portsmouth, where Jane's brothers Frank and Charles were stationed in their naval careers.

What she wrote during this time

Due to her frequent moves and unsettled lifestyle this was another unproductive period for Jane. In 1809 she tried to buy back her manuscript for *Susan* from the publisher, but couldn't afford to pay the £10 they asked for.

CHAWTON (1808-1817)

In 1808 Edward Austen's wife Elizabeth sadly died during the birth of her 11th child. Edward then invited his mother and sisters to live at a cottage in the grounds of his Chawton estate in Hampshire. The six bedroom cottage was close to Steventon, where Jane's brother James was now the rector, and the women happily moved into the cottage. The family led a quiet, private life and while she lived at Chawton Jane spent her time in much the same way every day: she would wake up, practice the pianoforte, cook breakfast for the household and then go and work on her writing, having fulfilled her household duties for the day.

What she wrote during this time

Jane's thirties proved to be the most productive period of her life, as she published four novels, completed one, and began another. Between 1808 and 1811 Jane reworked both *Elinor and Marianne* and *First Impressions*, changing their titles to the now familiar *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. *Sense and Sensibility* was published in 1811 and *Pride and Prejudice* was published in 1813 by Thomas Egerton (for more on these novels see Chapter 5). Jane then moved to the publisher John Murray and wrote *Mansfield Park*, which was published in 1814 ([here](#)), followed by *Emma* in 1815 ([here](#)). *Mansfield Park* was ignored by reviewers but proved very popular nonetheless, selling out in six months and requiring a second edition in 1815. This second edition exhausted demand, however, and the failure was only offset by the success of *Emma*.

What did Jane Austen look like?

There are only two verified portraits of Jane Austen – both done by her sister Cassandra. One is a view of Jane's back and the other was said by her niece Anna to be 'hideously unlike' Jane. There seems to have been some disagreement within her family over Jane's looks, with her aunt Phila saying she was, 'not at all pretty' while others remembered her as fair and handsome', and others still that she had 'a clear brown complexion, darkish brown hair and hazel eyes'. Most accounts of Jane make mention of her eyes though, suggesting they were her best feature.

The Jane Austen Centre in Bath commissioned a portrait artist to create a more accurate portrait of Jane, using Cassandra's portrait and FBI forensic techniques, altering it to match the portraits of the other Austen family members, along with the written accounts of Jane's appearance. The image is very different to Cassandra's portrait so we are only left to guess about what Jane really looked like.

LIFE AS A PUBLISHED AUTHOR

Jane's novels were all published anonymously by 'A Lady' and only Jane's family knew her identity as the author. This proved to be a great family joke, and there is one account of Jane's niece Anna, while in a library with Jane and Cassandra, picking up a copy of *Sense and Sensibility* and saying 'Oh that must be rubbish, I am sure from the title', much to her aunts' amusement. In 1813 after *Pride and Prejudice* had published to favourable reviews and was widely popular, Henry let Jane's identity as the author slip when he couldn't help telling someone who was praising *Pride and Prejudice* that the author was his sister.

Pocket Fact

Writing was considered to be a scandalous occupation for a woman at this time. Most women preserved their reputation by publishing anonymously and one contemporary of Jane's, Mary Brunton, in explaining why she would never allow her name to be known said: 'To be pointed at - to be noticed & commented upon - to be suspected of literary airs - to be shunned, as literary women are ... My dear, I would sooner exhibit myself as a rope dancer'.

Henry often acted as a representative for his sister at her publishers in London and she often stayed with him when correcting proofs of her novels. In 1813 Henry fell ill and was attended by the Prince Regent's physician. This connection allowed Jane to learn that the Prince Regent, George IV, was a big fan of her work and that he kept a set of her novels at all of his residences. Jane was introduced to the Prince's librarian, Mr Clarke, who invited her (or rather ordered her) to dedicate her latest novel, *Emma*, to the Prince. A few years later Jane wrote a satirical piece

called 'Plan of a novel', which is thought to have been based on the suggestions Mr Clarke made for her next novel.

Falling ill

Emma (1815) was Jane's last novel to be published in her lifetime. She had begun work on a new novel called *The Elliots* (later published as *Persuasion*) in 1816 and in the same year Henry had bought back the manuscript and copyright of her novel *Susan* from the publisher who had acquired it 14 years earlier. Jane was forced to postpone publishing these novels though, as her family met with further financial difficulty. The bank where her brother Henry worked - and where her other brothers had invested their money - failed, leaving Henry deeply in debt and losing all of the Austen brothers large sums of money. Things were so dire for Henry and Frank that they were unable to continue financially supporting their mother and sisters.

During this black period, Jane began to feel unwell. Struggling on, she decided to change the ending of *The Elliots* and finally completed it in 1817. She began work on another novel called *The Brothers* (later called *Sanditon*) but soon became too weak to continue. She had to begin writing with a pencil rather than a quill pen but by March 1817 she had to stop writing all together.

WINCHESTER (1817)

In March 1817 Jane became so weak that she was forced to stop writing, and in April that year she penned her will. By May her condition had deteriorated so much that she moved to Winchester to be nearer her doctor. Jane died peacefully on 18 July 1817 with her head in Cassandra's lap. There have been many theories put forward to explain her death, including Addison's disease, Hodgkin's

lymphoma and bovine tuberculosis, although the exact cause remains obscure.

Through her family's clerical connections it was arranged that Jane would be laid to rest in Winchester Cathedral, where she was buried on 24 July 1817.

The epitaph on Jane's grave reads:

'In Memory of JANE AUSTEN, youngest daughter of the late Revd GEORGE AUSTEN, formerly Rector of Steventon in this County. She departed this Life on the 18 th of July 1817, aged 41, after a long illness supported with the patience and the hopes of a Christian. The benevolence of her heart, the sweetness of her temper, and the extraordinary endowments of her mind obtained the regard of all who knew her and the warmest love of her intimate connections. Their grief is in proportion to their affection, they know their loss to be irreparable, but in their deepest affliction they are consoled by a firm though humble hope that her charity, devotion, faith and purity have rendered her soul acceptable in the sight of her REDEEMER.'

While this inscription mentions the 'extraordinary endowments of her mind' it does not mention the fact that Jane was a writer. However, an obituary of Jane appeared in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1817, reading, At Winchester, Miss Jane Austen, youngest daughter of Rev. George Austen, Rector of Steventon, Hants, authoress of *Emma, Mansfield Park, Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility.*'

In 1872 another plaque was added by Jane's nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh and in 1900 public funds paid for the installation of a stained glass window depicting St Augustine, with a Latin inscription which reads, 'Remember in the Lord Jane Austen, who died 18 July, AD