Celebrating 200 Years of Pride and Prejudice (1813): Austen-Inspired Literature for Young Adults

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As Miss Bingley from *Pride and Prejudice* aptly notes, there is “no enjoyment like reading”—especially when reading Austen-inspired literature for young adults.

“It is a truth universally acknowledged . . .” that Jane Austen’s life and work have inspired hundreds of adaptations, sequels, prequels, and retellings. Adult-level books and series, like Shannon Hale’s *Austenland* and *Midnight in Austenland* and Carrie Babis’ highly rated *Mr. and Mrs. Darcy Mysteries*, are enjoyed by both adult and teenaged Austen enthusiasts. The young adult titles below complement Austen’s novels and satisfy the “anything-Austen-is-good” appetite of budding Janeites; they also scaffold her novels by introducing the archetypes, vocabulary, and historical and social conventions that are portrayed in her stories. Hopefully, these books—enjoyable reads themselves—will encourage reading of Austen’s novels, but all will be enjoyed on their own merits.

**AUSTEN, GRAPHICALLY RENDERED**

These adaptations of Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Northanger Abbey* closely adhere to the original novels’ plots, characters, and settings. The pictures and dialogue give the reader a good feel for Austen’s style and her characters’ personalities and attitudes; text boxes clarify and advance the story with Austen-like succinctness. Readers will learn of the mores, etiquette, and conventions depicted in Austen’s novels; modern-looking characters help the reader appreciate the novels’ timeless themes and character traits.

**ADORABLE AUSTEN - ABRIDGED**

For a quick overview, especially for younger YA readers, Gil Tavner’s *Real Reads Classics: Jane Austen* provides short, easy retellings of her six major novels. Ann Kronheimer’s illustrations give readers vivid images of the characters and setting. Each volume is divided into three parts: part one comprises illustrated descriptions of major characters; part two is an illustrated retelling of the story; and part three contains useful resources including: “Filling in Gaps” (details from the original novel omitted from the retelling); “Background Information” (understandable literary criticism of the novel); “Books” (recommended reading about Jane Austen’s life and times); and “Food for Thought” (questions to ponder and/or discuss about the novel’s characters, style, and themes). This series is a nice addition to middle school library and classroom collections.

**AUSTEN’S LIFE, TIMES AND WORKS**

Though marketed for adults, *Jane Austen for Beginners* is a good place for students to start their Austen information. Robert Dryden provides biographical information about Austen’s family and draws parallels between people and events in Austen’s life and world to people and events in her novels. Summaries of Austen’s six major novels provide a feminist perspective and character and archetype analyses (how she punishes or rewards her archetypal rake and Cinderella, for example). An appendix contains a list of film and print adaptations, Austen-related blogs and websites, and a bibliography. This is a well-organized introduction to Austen and a useful supplement to her novels.

**AUSTEN’S WORLD**

In *Jane Austen: A Life Revealed*, Catherine Reef intersperses historical events, primary documents, quotes from letters, photographs, and paintings to give the reader a very good sense of Jane Austen, the person, and how the time, place, and social stratum she occupied shaped her perception of the world and forged her novels. Readers learn of the stratified society, mores, manners, and entitlements of Austen’s late 18th- and early 19th-century England, particularly the status of women. Reef, with numerous quotes, describes the influence of other authors and how Austen’s books came to be published and were received.

**ADOLESCENT AUSTEN**

Cora Harrison’s fictional memoir, *I Was Jane Austen’s Best Friend*, provides a peek into the life of fifteen-year-old Jane Austen through her sixteen-year-old cousin Jenny Cooper’s (fictional) journal entries. These entries, based on fact, span a period of three months in 1791, from Jane, Jenny, and her sister Cassandra’s time as students at Mrs. Cowley’s boarding school in Southampton, England, through Jenny’s move to the Austens at Stevenson. Jenny Cooper’s journal entries include an extraordinary number of details taken from historical Jane Austen’s life, including her plays, books, balls, travels, and friends. The memoir is a wonderful look into Jane Austen’s life and times, and, by extension, her novels.

**AUSTEN’S ARCHETYPES**

In *Sass & Serendipity*, Jennifer Ziegler’s modern retelling of Jane Austen’s novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, seventeen-year-old Gabriella (Gabby), a hard-working student with a part-time job, blames her “deadbeat” father for her parents’ divorce and serious financial problems. Younger sister Daphne, impulsive and quick to judge, struggles with school, plans to get a job, and adores Dad. High school sophomore Daphne falls in love and fantasizes about marriage; if only she would be more sensible like her sister Gabby (“Crabby Gabby,” per Daphne). In spite of all the fighting, sisterly love is just beneath the surface. Ziegler tells the story from each girl’s perspective and the reader empathizes with both, each dealing with the normal trials and tribulations of adolescence with superimposed poverty and divorce.

**AUSTEN-FLAVORED**

In Stephanie Strohm’s *Pilgrims Don’t Wear Pink*, seventeen-year-old Minnesotan Libby loves Jane Austen novels and “dream[s] of a time of true love, courtly manners, and real gentlemen.” Libby is mad for history and fashion and spends the summer interning at a living history museum, set in the year 1791.

Not directly based on a particular Austen novel, this story has gothic (think ghost) and romance (think shirtless lumberjack) overtures and Austen-like characters—from the gentleman “look-
AUSTEN TODAY

Ashleigh is an Enthusiast with a capital E; her latest obsession is Jane Austen. She dresses Regency-era and speaks "Austenese"—"Let us repair to your abode, where there is more room." She wanted to address friend Julie as "Miss Lefkowitz" but was reminded that Pride and Prejudice's Elizabeth Bennett called her best friend Charlotte.

Julie and Ashleigh make frequent references to Austen's novels and characters; events and dilemmas in Enthusiasm are similar to those in Austen's novels, as when Ashleigh mistakes a "mild regard" for a "more intense emotion" (à la Harriet in Emma). With characters that resemble Austen's fictional archetypes (i.e., the seductive creep), this fun read is a good introduction or complement to her novels.

ANACHRONISTIC ANNE ELLIOT

For Darkness Shows the Stars is a post-apocalyptic parallel to Jane Austen's Persuasion. After a terrible genetic accident and the War of the Lost nearly destroy humanity, Luddite lords, saved by their contempt for technology and modern medicine, manage large but declining estates worked by the greatly diminished "Reduced" caste and their descendants. Elliot North manages her ruthless and inept father's estate. Striving to maintain appearances and feed the laborers, she rents an adjoining estate and shipyard soon visited by the Cloud Fleet led by Elliot's childhood infatuation who, years previously, had fled. Elliot's Luddite beliefs are at odds with her benevolence and sense of duty, forcing difficult decisions. For Darkness Shows the Stars brings Austen's characters and enduring themes to a futurist society.

WORKS Discussed

Bebris, Carrie. Mr. and Mrs. Darcy Mystery Series


ALSO CONSIDER

"Bennett constructs a readable fiction of how Jane [Austen] could have been motivated to write her early novels."—Julie Scardato.
"Regency period Agnes Willikins ... uses poignant Austen quotes in response to her mother's constricting attitudes to her dress and demeanor."—Ann Reddy Damon.

"Everything revolves around . . . dates for prom [instead of] wedding proposals. Major plot and characters stay the same [as Pride and Prejudice]."—Teresa Copeland.
"Fans of Jane Austen will delight in this wickedly funny contemporary mystery, which features among its cast of characters several modern day interpretations of Austen's immortal characters."—John Charles and Joanna Morrison.
"England's Jane does an excellent job of describing the time in which Austen lived ... and offers young readers an interesting view of the life and times of this famous author."—Heather Pittman.
"Everything [readers] will need to know about cooking in Regency England."—Anita Beaman.
"The spirited Dashwood sisters—sensible, thoughtful Ellie; flighty drama queen Abby; and sporty tomboy Georgie—are having quite the life drama . . . [in this] lighthearted romance."—Carlisle Kraft Webber.