

# Jane Austen's 250th Anniversary [C1]

Il 16 dicembre 1775 nacque, nel sud dell'Inghilterra, una delle autrici più ammirate e amate della letteratura inglese e mondiale, un fenomeno che supera epoche e culture. Approfondiamo quel poco che si sa dei suoi 41 anni di vita.

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The quintessentially English author Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775 in the small village of Steventon, North Hampshire, in the south of England. The daughter of village **vicar** Reverend George Austen, she spent the early part of her life in Steventon Rectory. As the seventh of eight children, Austen was used to the **hubbub** of a busy home, and the comings and goings of her many **siblings**. But she also enjoyed the peace and quiet of the rural surroundings, and found it a bit of a shock when her father suddenly announced they were moving 50 miles (or 80 km) away, to spa town Bath.

## TO SOUTHAMPTON

After her father died in 1805, Jane then accompanied her mother, her sister Cassandra, and friend Martha Lloyd to Southampton, approximately 64 miles (103 km) south. It took Jane some time to adjust to living in the city on the south coast, but she enjoyed **strolling** along Southampton's medieval town walls, and dancing at The Dolphin Hotel, which still stands today and serves as student accommodation.

## A PLACE TO WRITE

After four years in this city, the family moved to a house provided by her brother Edward in the picturesque village of Chawton in East Hampshire. It was in this setting, in what is today the South Downs National Park, that she completed all six of her novels, four of which — Sense and Sensibility (1811), Pride and Prejudice (1813), Mansfield Park (1814), and Emma (1815) — were published during her lifetime. In 1817, however, Jane fell ill and moved to

Winchester, where her doctor was based. Efforts to save her were in vain, and she died at the age of forty-one.

## THE MUSEUM

While Jane Austen was buried in Winchester, she is most associated with Chawton, where she lived for the final eight years of her life. Today, her home has become a museum called Jane Austen House Museum. To find out more, Speak Up contacted museum officer Rebecca Wood. As Wood explains, Jane Austen's **tight-knit** family played an important role in her success as an author. **Rebecca Wood (English accent):** Her father, when she was growing up, would read her short stories [that] she wrote as a teenager, he tried to get a publisher in contact when she'd done a first **draft** of what would go on to become Pride and Prejudice. And even through to when they're living at the House in Chawton, her sister Cassandra sort of takes on more of the **household** management so that Jane has more time for writing. So I think it's lovely that even though during her life she publishes anonymously, her family are really supportive of her writing and try and help her as much as they can to give her space for that.

## INSPIRATIONS

A look at her life reveals just how much Austen **relied** on the men in her family. In fact, her novels have been interpreted as feminist, because they highlight the limitations for women at that time, and **portray** intelligent, **witty** and independent heroines. As Wood explains, Austen found her inspiration in the women around her as well as in books. **Rebecca Wood:** Her family were really creative and very sort of intelligent. Her father was a reverend and he also had an extensive library which included things like popular novels, and Jane and Cassandra were allowed to read whatever they wanted from there, so she was a really avid reader. Even their mother, Mrs. Austen, would write funny little comedic poems and things. And she also had a neighbour called Madame Lefroy, who was a generation older than Jane Austen, but Madame Lefroy had written poems and got herself published as well. So when Jane would meet with her, she was probably quite admiring

this neighbour of hers that was a woman that had got published and that she could talk to and discuss things with. So I think she was quite an inspiration as well for Jane or sort of a role model, perhaps.

## STILL RELEVANT

Austen's appeal **lasts** to this day and her novels are often the theme of popular TV dramas. We asked Wood why her popularity **endures**. **Rebecca Wood:** I think people just love the characters that she creates, even though they are set in worlds two hundred years ago. They are still just like people you might meet today. You might meet someone that's sort of quite **confident** and **bold**, like in Elizabeth Bennet [the protagonist of Pride and Prejudice], or someone that's maybe a bit of a **busy-bodying** mother, like Mrs. Bennet. And I think the characters work even in a modern setting, they just feel very real. One of the important themes in her books is finding a home and getting security... lots of the heroines face that problem of wanting to be comfortable and secure. There's all the classics of two characters meeting and not liking each other at the start, but sort of slowly falling in love throughout the book and things. And those are the sort of tropes that you still see in other popular books and films and TV and stuff today. So the **plot lines**, even though they are in the 1800s, the **plot lines** still work even in a modern setting.

## UNUSUAL FEAT

At that time, the vast majority of published authors were male, so being published as a woman (**albeit** anonymously) was unusual. We asked Wood about this. **Rebecca Wood:** We can definitely look at it now as this sort of act of **pursuing** a dream and a goal as a woman at a time when that wasn't something you were **encouraged** to do. There were a few other female writers around at the time, and Jane always seemed to be very encouraging of them. She was always reading other female writers as well; people like Ann Radcliffe, she was a big fan of hers. So she sort of supports her sister authors as she thinks of them. A lot of the books at the time were published by men, so for her to go out and publish, not with her name on but with the

pseudonym of "A Lady", so she's putting it out there that these are written by women and doesn't shy away from that. Something that surprised me or something I've come to learn through being at the museum was how ambitious Jane Austen was. She can often be portrayed as (a) sweet sort of spinster who wrote some books and things, but actually she took it really, really seriously. She drafted and re-drafted, and she dealt with her publishers and she was very passionate about her books. She refers to Pride and Prejudice as her "darling child", so they are... they are like her children to her. I think just how driven and how hard she worked at being a writer, it wasn't something she sort of did on the side casually, it was something she really pursued.

## MARRIAGE STORIES

While Austen herself never married, the topic of marriage frequently comes up in her novels. We spoke to Wood about Austen's fascination with tying the knot in her books. **Rebecca Wood:** Jane Austen's novels pretty much always end in a marriage, but she herself wasn't married, her sister also never married either, so they were quite the unusual household when it was the women all living together. But I think for Jane, she sees quite a lot of marriages. Many of her brothers marry, her family nieces and nephews marry. One of her nieces, called Fanny Knight, was writing to Jane, I think when Fanny was about twenty or so, sort of about boys and romance, almost getting advice from her aunt. And Jane replies to her essentially saying that "anything is to be preferred or endured, rather than marrying without affection." So I think in the novels she advocates marrying for love or affection, and that is also what she would tell people in real life as well.

## A ROOM OF HER OWN

And, as Wood explains, it is possible that Austen chose writing instead of starting her own family. **Rebecca Wood:** As to why she doesn't marry, we don't have one particular answer why she didn't decide to marry. But a big part of it may have been that she wanted to be a writer and the expectations

were that if you married, you would then be looking after a **household** and you would be having lots of children and there wouldn't be time for you to be writing. Your husband might not approve of you writing. And, you know, her family were supportive, but a husband might not have been. So I think for Jane, perhaps she was prioritising the thing that she really wanted, and that was gonna make her happiest, and that was writing.

[www.janeaustens.house](http://www.janeaustens.house)

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# Glossary

- **bold** = audace, intraprendente
- **busy-bodying** = impicciona
- **siblings** = fratelli e sorelle
- **strolling** = passeggiare
- **witty** = argute
- **pursuing** = dedicarsi a
- **spinster** = zitella
- **tying the knot** = sposarsi
- **hubbub** = trambusto
- **relied** = dipendere
- **lasts** = durare
- **plot lines** = trame
- **draft** = bozza
- **driven** = determinata, decisa
- **nephews** = nipoti (maschi)
- **albeit** = anche se, sebbene
- **encouraged** = incoraggiare
- **nieces** = nipoti (femmine)
- **endures** = resistere
- **shy away** = tirarsi indietro
- **advice** = consiglio
- **vicar** = pastore
- **confident** = sicuro di sé
- **household management** = gestione della casa
- **portray** = rappresentare
- **household** = casa, nucleo familiare
- **tight-knit** = molto unita