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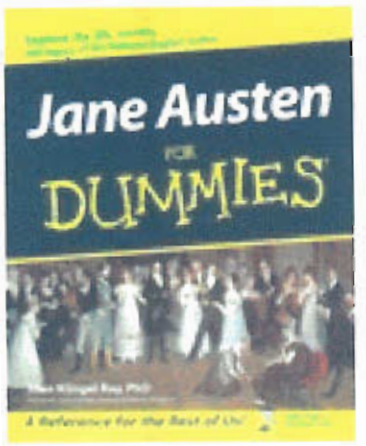

Chapter 14

Reading Jane Austen

In This Chapter

- Studying each of Austen's six major novels
- Forming a study group and having some discussion

Many of you reading this book read Austen's novels for pure pleasure, and that's just fine. But Austen put a lot of effort into her writing, and she deals with much more than courtship. So this chapter suggests some ways of approaching each of the six novels so that perhaps you can get more out of them than you have. The nice thing about this is that there are no papers and no grades!

Keep in mind that readers come to Austen's novels at different ages and with different life experiences. Speaking for myself as a lifelong Austen reader, I can say that as a teenager, I read her books for their romantic stories. But as I got older and became more informed about my own world and Austen's, I became more aware of her as a social satirist. I found myself laughing with her more than I did as a teenager.

So as you — yes, you! — read Austen, you will approach and come away from her with different reactions. But her novels are always vivid and meaningful. For this reason, she's a classic.

Reading Northanger Abbey

Northanger Abbey shows its early place in her writing because at the end of Volume 1, Chapter 5, Austen defends the novel as a form of literature. It's as if she has to reinforce for both her readers and herself that novels are quality literature. This book is the only time that she ever defends her chosen form of literature, the novel.

Knowing the background

Austen's writing this novel, first as *Susan* and then as *Catherine,* undoubtedly came about as her reaction to the popular "Gothic novels" of her day — fiction that set a young heroine in scary, mysterious circumstances with ghosts and spirits, or what seemed like ghosts and spirits, making noises and frightening her as she loses sleep in a dark room with no candle or fire (both have been blown out) and no lock on her door. The most popular Gothic novel and the one that most influences Austen's reading heroine, Catherine Morland, is Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho.*

Radcliffe's *Udolpho* deals with a young lady, Emily, who's orphaned and compelled to live with her aunt, who marries the striking, but scary, Montoni. He takes his new wife and her impressionable niece to his fortresslike castle of Udolpho high in the Italian mountains. He's accompanied by a gang of threatening-looking thugs. Hearing all kinds of strange noises, Emily snoops around the castle, scares herself, and spends many sleepless nights. After reading several hundred pages, the reader discovers that Montoni is after Emily's inheritance, which the aunt has left to Emily. Montoni tries to scare Emily into signing papers that will turn her inheritance over to him, but Emily doesn't budge. She's finally saved, and Montoni's plan fails.

Linking Northanger Abbey to Udolpho

Not only does Catherine Morland love scaring herself by reading *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* but Henry Tilney, who has also read the book — his "'hair standing on end the whole time,'" as he jokes — teases Catherine on their way to Northanger Abbey by taking some of Emily's Udolpho adventures and suggesting that Catherine may experience something similar at the Abbey. But this is only the most obvious way Austen uses Radcliffe's book in her novel.

While Catherine expects to find that the severe General Tilney, father of her friends Henry and Eleanor, is Montoni-like in having locked up his wife and deprived her of care, she learns that the general is actually only greedy: He thinks Catherine is rich and dismisses her from the Abbey when he incorrectly believes that she's a poor fortune-hunter. But in reviewing *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* you see that Montoni — though a murderer — is also greedy. So Catherine's suspicions that the general is like Montoni aren't really that far off the mark.

Watching Catherine learn

Naïve and inexperienced, Catherine goes to Bath with family friends, Mr. and Mrs. Allen. Bath was the popular spa city where people went not only for their health but also to introduce their marriage-aged children to the whirling

social life and perhaps to meet a future spouse. More interested in fashion than Catherine, Mrs. Allen means well, but she's a poor guide for Catherine. But Catherine has good instincts. And so she doesn't allow herself to be guided by the dangerous yet attractive Isabella Thorpe into doing things that aren't right, such as breaking promises. Likewise, Catherine always senses that General Tilney's children are uncomfortable around their father (something is strange about the general). Catharine is, of course, correct, but she learns it the hard away — by being suddenly sent home — and not knowing until later how misled the general's greed has allowed him to be.

Catherine's coming to learn more about herself and others begins a pattern in Austen's writing. Her heroines achieve better self-knowledge, as well as better knowledge of the world through their mistakes.

Hearing the narrator's irony in Northanger Abbey

The *narrator* of a novel is the voice that tells the story. In this early novel Austen speaks quite overtly in her own voice — for example, in her defense of the novel as a literary form or genre. Elsewhere in the book, Austen is unusually heavy-handed in her narration, dripping with *verbal irony,* which is when you say something, but mean something else. Here's an example of verbal irony from *Northanger Abbey:*

> Where people wish to attach, they should always be ignorant. To come with a well-informed mind, is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid. A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing any thing, should conceal it as well as she can. (NA 1:14)

This passage occurs when Catherine and the Tilneys are walking together, and the Tilneys begin to praise the scenery, using language that shows their familiarity with art. Catherine feels "ashamed of her ignorance," and the implication is that she will defer to the Tilneys' views. But does Austen really want females to be ignorant? While Doctors Fordyce and Gregory, mentioned in Chapter 9, prescribed female ignorance as a way of catching a husband, Austen certainly doesn't uphold this view in her other novels. So what's with Catherine? And what's with Austen? Austen is being ironic.

Readers should contemplate another irony in the novel. Catherine is Austen's most inexperienced heroine and one of her two youngest heroines at age 17. (*Sense and Sensibility*'s Marianne Dashwood is the other young heroine.) And Henry Tilney is her most teacher-ish hero, ready to instruct Catherine, who thinks that he's always right. After all, he's "about four or five and twenty," and a university graduate (NA 3:2). But by the end of the book, it turns out

that Henry is wrong in not suspecting his father of greed, and Catherine is right in sensing a villain lurking within the general — a villain who allowed himself to be duped by another character's conflicting stories about Catherine Morland. Who's the most ignorant person now? Not Catherine! So much for the general.

Reading Sense and Sensibility

Sense and Sensibility is one of those titles that lead a reader to think, at first glance, that these two traits are going to be opposed by two characters. *Sense* is common sense, practicality, intelligence, and reason. *Sensibility,* in Austen's time, meant relying on one's feelings as a guide to behavior, as a guide to truth. Is Austen preparing to advocate one over the other?

Erring with either sense or sensibility

The two Dashwood sisters, Elinor and Marianne, are sometimes seen as representing sense (Elinor) and sensibility (Marianne). But each heroine has some of each trait, and each heroine suffers by letting one trait dominate. Austen shows us that neither sense nor sensibility is the right way to go. A person needs to be balanced.

Elinor's sense

Elinor seems to be the one with sense:

- She advises her mother about saving money and living economically.
- She advises Marianne to reject Willoughby's present of a horse on the grounds of its expense.
- She knows how to play the social game and is always polite, responsive, and pleasant, even to those who try her patience, because she sees that practical good sense is the best way to achieve the "general civility" that she desires all to practice.

Yet her sense that Edward Ferrars loves her and not Lucy causes her great emotional pain because Edward has neither the sense nor the sensibility to come out and tell his true feelings and personal circumstances. Elinor has strong feelings, "but she know how to govern them" — by sense (SS 1:1). But with Edmund's odd behavior — he hangs around her, but looks gloomy and acts like a friend, rather than a boyfriend — Elinor still maintains a calm exterior. Puzzled, Elinor arrives at a conclusion drawn from common sense: Edward's behavior is the result of his mother's pressuring him to marry a

wealthier young lady. But Elinor's sense takes a real hit when the manipulative and money-hungry Lucy Steele confides in Elinor that she, Lucy, has been secretly engaged to Edward for four years. No wonder Edward's behaving oddly!

Elinor's stiff upper lip gets only stiffer from acting as though she's not in love with Edward and doesn't care about his engagement to Lucy. Instead of looking gloomy and hurt, Elinor puts up a good front: She acts coolly and behaves reasonably, as if all is well. She shows no emotion and tells no one of her feelings. Forced into a role of constant game-playing by and with Lucy, Elinor doesn't make sense look very appealing. While emotionally certain that Edward truly loves her and is tired of Lucy — this is Elinor's sensibility at work — her senses show her that everything conspires to get Lucy and Edward married:

- He keeps the engagement even though his mother disinherits him for it.
- Lucy sticks to him like glue, even though he has been disinherited (after all, his little money is far more than she has!).
- He unexpectedly gets a church living with a house from Colonel Brand on — when it looks like nothing will be available for him — that will enable him to save money to marry Lucy.

Yet this makes no sense to her: She can see that Edward is trying to get out of his Lucy entanglement.

Marianne's sensibility

Marianne uses her feelings (sensibility) as her guide.

- She flaunts convention and decorum, going off with Willoughby for an unchaperoned carriage ride to explore a house where she has no permission to be.
- She insists she has done no wrong because her feelings would've told her if her actions were incorrect.
- Her senses tell her that Willoughby loves her:
  - He pays attention only to her.
  - He asks for a clipping of her hair as a love token.
  - He likes everything she likes.
  - He acts like a hero of sensibility, a man of feeling who adores her.

What makes more sense than to think he's truly caring, based on such evidence? But Willoughby uses a selfish sense to guide his actions. He deserts Marianne because his financial sense tells him he needs to marry money. His

sense of self-preservation also told him to desert the pregnant Eliza Williams so he wouldn't get stuck with her and their baby. If Willoughby's sense dictated such behavior, can sense be all that desirable? Meanwhile, Marianne, unable to find meaning in Willoughby's conduct and unwilling to control her emotions with even a little sense, is left to suffer: Her feelings betray her body, and she slips into a deeper and deeper depression until she nearly dies from a resulting infection brought on by an extended period of neither sleeping nor eating. Willoughby's cruelty to her makes no sense for a long time, and so her sensibilities go on overload, weakening her body. Marianne believed her feelings for Willoughby and Willoughby's feelings for her. But feelings turned out to be an unreliable guide without some sense to temper them.

Just as Elinor suffers from repressing her sensibilities with too much sense, so Marianne suffered from refusing to let any sense temper her sensibilities.

Seeing other characters' sense and/or sensibility

Elinor and Marianne aren't the only characters in the novel to get tangled up in sense and sensibility.

- At the opening of the novel, Uncle Dashwood disinherits the Dashwood females and gives his estate to a 4-year-old grandnephew. Now is that sense or sensibility?
  - On the one hand, the uncle was charmed by the child's antics (sensibility).
  - On the other hand, the uncle undoubtedly sees that leaving his estate to the little boy ensures male Dashwood occupancy for several more generations (sense).

  Similarly, when Fanny and John Dashwood assist each other in arguing away John's promise to his father to assist his stepmother and sisters, are they using sense or sensibility? Certainly, Fanny's financial sense is at work as she pressures her husband's sensibility in saving everything for their little boy.
- Mrs. Ferrars disinherits Edward, her elder son and heir, because he honors his engagement to Lucy: Is that Mrs. Ferrars's sense at work in protecting the Ferrars money from a gold-digger or her emotional reaction of anger prompting her to punish Edward monetarily?

Neither sense nor sensibility is always right. Either can lead people to cruelty, greed, selfishness, or goodness. The two characteristics need to be balanced so that neither is perverted by the other.

Reading Pride and Prejudice

This novel's title is another one that suggests that two traits are going to be opposed and represented by two different characters — usually seen as Darcy's pride and Elizabeth's prejudice against him. But Austen isn't that simple. And the novel reveals that

- There are many kinds of pride and prejudice.
- Different characters display these characteristics for better or for worse.

Getting past the first line of the novel

Before examining how pride and prejudice vary in the novel, it's worthwhile to examine the book's famous first line: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Sounds true, yes? But after reading the first chapter, the reader sees that the reverse is true: that single women desire single men with money. Austen has written the line with *verbal irony* — saying one thing, while meaning its opposite. The single rich man is considered the "rightful property" of the women, and so the game is on. Neither Darcy nor Bingley came to Meryton with the intention of marrying. But by the end of the novel, they both marry daughters of the village.

Determining who's proud and who's prejudiced

At one time covers of paperback editions of *Pride and Prejudice* frequently bore the profiles of a young woman and man (Elizabeth and Darcy), with her profile under *Prejudice* and his over *Pride*. And in the Meryton Assembly scene, when Darcy refuses to dance with Elizabeth and says so within her hearing, he certainly seems proud, and she certainly develops a prejudice against him.

But right from the first page of the novel, readers begin to encounter pride and prejudice in many forms:

- Mr. Bennet is prejudiced in favor of Lizzy (Elizabeth), who is clever like he is, and Mrs. Bennet is proud of Jane's beauty and her own.
- Mrs. Bennet is prejudiced in favor of Lydia and ridiculously proud when Lydia, who has been shamelessly living with Wickham, comes home a married woman after a Regency version of a shotgun wedding.

- Elizabeth is prejudiced in Jane's favor when her sister questions whether Bingley really loves her.
- Elizabeth is proud of her prejudices against Darcy, until she learns that Wickham lied to her; then, her pride is deflated.
- Collins is proud of his patroness Lady Catherine's "condescension" to him.
- Charlotte Lucas, desperate at being 27 years old and still unmarried, casts pride to the winds and accepts Collins as her husband.
- Lady Catherine is prejudiced against Elizabeth and tries to stop her from becoming engaged to Darcy.
- Miss Bingley is proud of her new money and new status, while she's prejudiced against those in trade — ironically forgetting that her father's being in trade gave her the new money and status she now has.
- Miss Bingley is prejudiced against Elizabeth because she sees that Darcy is interested in her.
- Wickham says Darcy is prejudiced against him.
- Elizabeth takes pride in her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner's appearance and personalities.
- Elizabeth has sufficient pride not to be cowed by Lady Catherine's pride.

Notice how at times pride and prejudice are *good* things.

Understanding Mr. Collins

Mr. Collins exemplifies unpleasant, even ridiculous pride because he is proud of Lady Catherine's "condescension" to him. While "condescension" in Austen's day had a positive meaning in referring to how higher class people could be pleasant to lower class people, Lady Catherine's "condescension" is more like the typical use of the word today: patronizing people, acting towards your inferiors in a way that shows you think they're inferior and you're a lot better than they are. Collins is proud that Lady Catherine gave him a church living. He brags of having Lady Catherine's patronage and praises her "condescension" to him. This condescension turns out to include advising him to marry, as well as to rearrange the furniture in his house and install shelves in his upstairs closets. But Collins is too stupid to take any offense at her being a busybody. That he gratefully accepts her interference in his personal life was probably why she selected him for the church living he now occupies. The Collins–Lady Catherine relationship is Austen's subtle way of telling her contemporary readers — who knew all about how the

Anglican Church gave out its local jobs — that selecting priests for a parish by private patronage might lead to giving spiritually and intellectually unqualified men the responsibility for many innocent souls. Austen's treatment of Collins is certainly merciless. For example, when he writes to the Bennets after Lydia's disgrace, advising them to turn her away from their family, Mr. Bennet dryly comments, "'*That* is his notion of Christian forgiveness!'" (PP 3:15). From that, the reader can only think, "His poor parishioners, having Collins as their spiritual adviser." (For details on church livings, see Chapter 10.)

Reading Mansfield Park

Many readers have traditionally been disappointed with Fanny Price, the heroine of *Mansfield Park*. The meek Fanny seems wimpy after reading about *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth. Yet when pressured by her cousins to act and by her uncle and cousin Edmund to accept Henry Crawford as husband material, she defies all of them, holding her ground and refusing to submit. So what's the matter with Fanny Price? Why does she make readers uncomfortable?

Dealing with abusive behavior

It's uncomfortable to watch Fanny because she's the victim of abuse. Her Aunt Norris, whom the Bertrams allow to have free reign at Mansfield Park, constantly berates her. She gives her a room with the maids and tells the little girl that she will never be equal to her cousins. She prohibits the maids from lighting a fire in Fanny's study on even the coldest days, and she makes Fanny walk back and forth between her home and Mansfield Park on the hottest day. Aside from this physical abuse, Aunt Norris practices psychological abuse on Fanny, making demeaning comments about her to her face or to others while Fanny is in the room. The abuse is uncomfortable to witness, even on the page of a book.

Likewise, Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram are abusers, but they're passive. By handing over their respective parental responsibilities to Aunt Norris, they allow her to get away with what she does. As readers, you may sometimes want to tap Sir Thomas on the shoulder and say, "Why don't you call Aunt Norris on this?" But you have to take yourselves out of the novel and read with what 19th-century poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge called "a willing suspension of disbelief."

Accepting a passive heroine

Coming as she does between Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, each of whom is anything but passive, Fanny Price's passivity can be surprising and even irritating to the reader. Yet when she reasserts her passivity by insisting that she can't "act" during the scenes when everyone pressures her to be in the play, she, ironically, is acting here. She is claiming for herself the right not to act which — ironically — is an act of will.

However, reading about the way people treat Fanny is painful. Many readers say that Fanny is the last Austen heroine with whom you'd want to have dinner! But Fanny is also the Austen heroine who endures the most misunderstanding, thoughtlessness, and abuse from others. How can you not be happy when Edmund marries her at last?

Hearing a very intrusive narrator

Not since *Northanger Abbey* have the readers of Austen's novels encountered such an intrusive narrator as they hear in *Mansfield Park*. Austen begins the final chapter saying, "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest" (MP 3:17). Austen could not be more obvious in showing who is in charge of the novel! And she then talks of "My Fanny," showing her affection for and attachment to her heroine.

Reading Emma

For most readers, *Emma* is two different books.

- The first time you read it, you may be duped by Frank Churchill's behavior and have little or no suspicion about why he behaves the way he does.
- Subsequent readings have readers marveling at the way Austen plants her clues and hints about Frank Churchill all along the way. Each reading uncovers another clue, and the book puts the reader in the role of detective. (Notice that I am not giving away the surprise here!)

Attending to the first line and first paragraph of the novel

Austen sets up her heroine for error in the opening line:

> Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her. (E 1:1)

The line promises a delightful heroine, suffering none of the problems and pains that her chronological predecessor Fanny Price did. But Austen slips in the word "seemed," tipping the reader that the rest of the novel may not be smooth sailing for Emma.

By the end of the third paragraph, the reader discovers that Emma has been "directed chiefly by her own" judgment. And then Austen drops the heavy shoe, saying, "The *real* evils, *indeed,* of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself." (I have italicized the words "real" and "indeed" to call attention to the way Austen tells of Emma's big problem: Her egoism is a real evil, and Austen underscores that by using the intensifying word "indeed.") So the reader knows why Emma makes the blunders she does from the outset.

Bringing in Mrs. Elton

Austen uses Mrs. Elton (the former Augusta Hawkins) for at least four reasons:

- By marrying Augusta Hawkins soon after being rejected by Emma, Mr. Elton shows that he wasn't really in love with Emma. Here Emma was right in assuming that if he couldn't get Miss Woodhouse with her £30,000, he would go after Miss Somebody (anybody) with £20,000 or £10,000. He gets the £10,000.
- She has the fancy first name "Augusta" derived from the Latin word *august,* meaning grand or sacred. Then she has the ordinary surname Hawkins, suggesting that she "hawks" or is "hawking" or advertising in the loud way that hawkers do. She brags about herself in every way she can: from her courtship with Mr. Elton to her sister's marriage to Mr. Suckling, who drives a barouche-landau carriage, a very ritzy vehicle. (To see a barouche-landau carriage, see Chapter 11.) Is it any wonder that the Sucklings' good friends are named the Bragges?

Austen rarely uses names symbolically. But she had a good time with this in *Emma*. In addition to the names mentioned above, she uses the name Frank Churchill to remind readers in the second or later go-round of this novel that Frank Churchill is anything but frank in his interactions with everyone.

- Mrs. Elton is an exaggerated version of Emma's egoism and desire to control others. She swoops — like a hawk — into Highbury, fastens hers claws to poor Jane Fairfax, and runs her life, despite Jane's awkward protests. What Emma did to Harriet Smith, Mrs. Elton does in a more vulgar way to Jane.
- Augusta Hawkins Elton comes from Bristol, a thriving commercial port connected to the slave trade. When Jane Fairfax connects being a governess to being a slave, Austen wants you to remember that Mrs. Elton, who's busy trying to get her into a family as a governess, is, in effect, dealing in the sale of Jane Fairfax. (For more on slavery during this period, see Chapter 2.)

So Austen gets a lot of mileage out of this obnoxious character, who, ironically, gets the last lines of speech in the novel as she criticizes Emma's wedding for having "'Very little white satin, very few lace veils.'" But doesn't it always seem like the pushiest people get the last word?

Reading Persuasion

Austen's final novel has the most social commentary in it. She was witnessing a changing society, where the long-established gentry was being nudged by a rising middle class, where men like Captain Wentworth, who actually earned money and status, were becoming players. Thus, *Persuasion* deals with men named in two different books:

- *The Baronetcy,* which is Sir Walter's favorite book because he sees his name and the land and title he inherited printed in it
- *Navy List,* which includes the names and ships of naval officers who have earned their rank by fighting courageously in a time of war and who have made themselves by *doing*

Austen shows the titled man who inherited his property and title to be vain, insipid, and irresponsible, while the naval officers are just the opposite. The subsequent Victorian age would vindicate her ideas with the rise of the middle class and the new concept that people should work for wealth and status. See Chapter 2 for more information on inheritance and earning status.

Meeting "Only Anne"

Minimized by her father and sisters, heroine Anne Elliot is "only Anne" to them, a mere nothing. Having "lost her bloom" in the eight years since her romance and break-up with Captain Wentworth before the novel begins, Anne is wispy and quiet, still in love with Wentworth, but feeling helpless to do anything about it because he hasn't attempted to contact her again, and protocol of the day says she can't make the first move in contacting him.

Yet as the novel proceeds and Anne moves farther away from her demeaning family, her stock with people goes up. She moves from being "only Anne" in the minimal sense to being "only Anne" in the unique sense. When she's at the Musgroves' two homes, *only Anne* can tend to the children well and listen patiently to everyone's complaints. At Lyme, Mr. Elliot looks admiringly at *only Anne.* When Louisa has her accident at Lyme, *only Anne* keeps her head as all about her lose theirs and Louisa hurts hers: Anne offers smelling salts and sends the proper individual — the one who lives in Lyme — to find help. At Bath, *only Anne* can translate the Italian songs. *Only Anne* regains her lost "bloom." Austen's use of the word "bloom" likens Anne to a flower that miraculously revives after eight years of dormancy. And at the end of the novel, Anne is the only heroine over whom Austen casts a shadow by writing in the final line that "She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm": her contemporary readers saw in hindsight that in setting her novel before Napoleon's escape from Elba, Austen was deliberately placing Wentworth in future danger with the revival of war with France.

Facing reader frustration

Some readers of this novel complain that the final section drags, beginning with the question the narrator poses on behalf of Anne: "How was the truth to reach him?" (P 2:8). The truth refers to Anne's lack of interest in Mr. Elliot as a husband and her true love for Wentworth: How will Anne convey this to Wentworth, who seeing Anne and Mr. Elliot together, has become jealous and shows Anne only formal courtesy? Nowadays, Anne would invite him for coffee and explain things. But in Austen's day protocol said that the woman should be passive, letting the man make the first move. Thus, in the novel's concert scene, she can make room on the bench for Wentworth to sit next to her, but she cannot, as a lady, say, "There's room here; why not sit down with us?"

As readers go along the slow and torturous route with Anne in subtly getting the "truth" to Wentworth, Austen has Anne accomplish her task cryptically. Anne converses with Captain Harville about female constancy, which Wentworth overhears as he writes a note to Captain Benwick. While Anne is

speaking directly to Harville, she's also communicating indirectly with Wentworth. As Wentworth is writing to Benwick, he's cautiously listening to Anne. Hearing her speak with passion and force of women's constancy in love, Wentworth now has the emotional permission he needed from her to write the passionate note he leaves for her to find. While all of this is highly romantic, Austen was also having Anne behave as a lady should in her day. She can't approach the man; it's his move.

In the 1995 film of *Persuasion,* Anne runs after Wentworth when he abruptly and jealously leaves the concert and stops him to ask if there's anything worth staying for. Anne is acting not only out of character in this added scene but also against the rules of behavior of the day. So when you think about it in the film: if Anne is willing to break with decorum and physically run after Wentworth at the concert, why wouldn't she come right out and tell him the truth? Adding that scenes undercuts Anne's real dilemma in the novel of "How was the truth to reach him?" in terms of the etiquette of the day.

Discussing Austen's Novels

General questions

Here are few topics for a group that has read all of Austen's novels:

- Readers sometimes call *Persuasion* Austen's book of second chances because after an eight-year hiatus, Anne and Wentworth get together. How might her other novels also be considered books of second chances?
- Analyze if there is a progression in the way Austen's heroines behave from the earliest novel through her final work.
- Create Austen's ideal man using characteristics from various male characters. Create different ideal males for different age groups.
- Create Austen's ideal woman using characteristics from various female characters. Create different ideal females for different age groups.

Discussing Northanger Abbey

These questions will get you going on *Northanger Abbey.* If you really want to get the most out of this novel, you might want to begin with reading Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* so you know what Austen is spoofing and why Austen's heroine Catherine is so terrified!

- From the opening pages of the book, what do you think Austen is spoofing in terms of the way heroines from earlier novels were presented?
- Analyze what makes Henry Tilney attractive to Catherine. Is he attractive to you? Why or why not?
- What lessons do Isabella's so-called friendships teach Catherine?
- How does Catherine's friendship with Eleanor differ from her friendship with Isabella?
- Analyze the failures of John Thorpe as a gentleman.
- Analyze General Tilney; the way his children react to him; the way Catherine reacts to him.

Discussing Sense and Sensibility

You might want to begin your discussion of this novel by creating, on a large pad, a family tree of the Dashwoods, because the book opens with a lot of them! Once you have the family structure and characters' identities down, you'll be set to get going on these questions:

- Analyze Mrs. Dashwood (the mother of Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret) as a mother.
- After reading the novel and watching the Emma Thompson film version of this novel, discuss what she gains or loses in casting Hugh Grant in the role of Edward Ferrars. How does Austen present Edward, and why does she do it in the way she does? What does Thompson add to Edward's characterization? Do her changes in any way affect your impressions of him? If so, how?
- Analyze Colonel Brandon as a romantic character. Who gets the better deal at the end of the novel, Marianne or Brandon? Explain.
- Analyze the way Lucy Steele plays the games of society to suck up to others.
- Discuss the characters in the novel in terms of all aspects you can think of regarding sense and sensibility.

Discussing Pride and Prejudice

Many people of your group may have seen the recent *Pride and Prejudice* television series and films, and so they will come to the novel with pre-conceived ideas about how characters look and behave. (See Chapter 15 for the film and television versions.) As the people in your group read this book, ask them to note any physical descriptions Austen gives of the characters.

- Does Mrs. Bennet get a fair deal from the narrator? Is she as stupid as she appears? Explain your answer.
- Discuss Darcy's friendship with Bingley: Speculate why they're friends. Can you forgive Darcy for meddling in the Jane/Bingley relationship? Why? Why not?
- Compare Charlotte Lucas Collins and Mr. Bennet in terms of how each deals with an unhappy marriage.
- Why are Elizabeth and Darcy a good couple?

- Watch the 1995 television miniseries of *Pride and Prejudice,* and then discuss the following:
  - Is Jennifer Ehle well cast in the role? Why? Compare her looks and actions to what Austen says in the novel.
  - Is Colin Firth well cast in the role? Why? Compare his looks and actions to what Austen says in the novel.
  - Notice the scenes that script writer Andrew Davies added to the series that weren't in the novel. What purposes do they serve?
- Watch the 2005 film of *Pride and Prejudice* and discuss the following:
  - How does the film change the setting of the novel? What purpose did it serve?
  - Compare the way Matthew MacFayden plays Darcy to the way Austen presents Darcy in her novel. Is Macfayden's portrayal accurate?
  - Compare the way Donald Sutherland plays Mr. Bennet in the film to the way Austen presents him in her novel. Is Sutherland's portrayal accurate.

Discussing Mansfield Park

If any of your group members have seen Patricia Rozema's film of *Mansfield Park,* and have not yet read the novel, they're in for a big surprise! Start your discussion with these questions:

- What is Austen showing through the Bertram sisters, Maria and Julia?
- Find a copy of the play *Lovers' Vows;* read it; then discuss why Austen chose that play for *Mansfield Park.*
- Analyze Mary Crawford. She's one of Austen's most complex characters. Determine her good and not-so-good traits. Why does Edmund fall in love with her?
- Henry Crawford starts his attentions to Fanny with the purpose of making a small hole in her heart. How do his feelings for Fanny change? Do you agree with the narrator at the end of the book that Henry truly loved Fanny? Why?
- Apply the traits of pride and prejudice to characters in this novel.

Discussing Emma

This is the novel that your group might wish to discuss twice: once the first time they read it and then again, after everyone re-reads it, noting all the clues Austen plants about the book's secret that causes Emma to be "duped."

- Austen said of this heroine that nobody but she, Emma's creator, would much like her. Do you like Emma? Why or why not?
- What are Emma's good qualities?
- How do you interpret Emma's interfering with people's lives? What are her motivations? Can you forgive her? Why?
- Emma and her father appear to be highly different. How are they alike?
- Trace the clues Austen presents regarding Frank Churchill's real reason for visiting Highbury. In so doing, trace how Frank covers his tracks.
- Watch Amy Heckerling's updating of *Emma* in the film *Clueless*. How does she change some of the characters to make them more relevant to your own time? Does the change work in still presenting the basic Austen character on whom the Heckerling character is modeled? Why?
- Watch the Gwyneth Paltrow *Emma* film. What is gained or lost in the presentation of Harriet Smith, played by Toni Collete? How does the film present Emma and Mr. Knightley's relationship? Is it effective? Why?
- Watch the Kate Beckensale television miniseries of *Emma*. This version is closer to the book. Compare and contrast the way the lead characters are played in this version and in and the Paltrow version.

Discussing Persuasion

Austen never had the chance — because of her fatal illness — to go through this book and revise it after letting the manuscript sit for a while. But she did make some changes in the final chapters of Volume 2: Revising her original Chapter 10 to what it is now, she wrote a new Chapter 11, and made changes in her old Chapter 11 to make it the current Chapter 12. Most editions of *Persuasion* have what are called "Austen's cancelled chapters" in an appendix at the end of the novel. Ask the group to read those chapters so that you can discuss and evaluate her changes.

- What was Lady Elliot like? Why did she marry Sir Walter?
- How do persuasion and persuading operate in the novel?

- Why did Lady Russell persuade Anne to drop Wentworth back in 1806? Can you justify Lady Russell's actions?
- What are your feelings about Mrs. Clay? What hints does Austen plant earlier in the novel for Mrs. Clay's final action?
- Evaluate the Crofts as a married couple.
- What do the senior Musgroves represent?
- Wentworth seems very romantic and heroic. Yet a case could be made for his being wimpy and unpleasant. Make that case *or* argue against it!
- Analyze the changes in Anne Elliot: how she goes from being "only Anne," as in "just Anne," to "only Anne," as in "uniquely Anne!"