



A  
JANE  
AUSTEN  
EDUCATION

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— HOW —  
SIX NOVELS  
TAUGHT ME  
ABOUT LOVE,  
FRIENDSHIP,  
— AND THE —  
THINGS THAT  
REALLY MATTER

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WILLIAM  
DERESIEWICZ







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HOW SIX NOVELS TAUGHT ME  
ABOUT LOVE, FRIENDSHIP, AND THE  
THINGS THAT REALLY MATTER

WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

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**also by william deresiewicz**

*Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets*

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To Jill,  
and to the memory of Karl Kroeber

## CHAPTER 1

### emma everyday matters

I was twenty-six, and about as dumb, in all human things, as any twenty-six-year-old has a right to be, when I met the woman who would change my life. That she'd been dead for a couple of hundred years made not the slightest difference whatsoever. Her name was Jane Austen, and she would teach me everything I know about everything that matters.

The thing that takes my breath away when I think back on it all is that I never wanted to read her in the first place. It happened quite by accident, and very much against my will. I had been eager, when I'd gone back to school to get my Ph.D. the year before, to fill the gaps in my literary education—Chaucer and Shakespeare, Melville and Milton—but the one area of English literature that held no interest for me, that positively repelled me, was nineteenth-century British fiction. What could be duller, I thought, than a bunch of long, heavy novels, by women novelists, in stilted language, on trivial subjects?

The very titles sounded ridiculous. *Jane Eyre*. *Wuthering Heights*. *Middlemarch*. But nothing symbolized the dullness and narrowness of that whole body of work like the name Jane Austen. Wasn't she the one who wrote those silly romantic fairy tales? Just thinking about her made me sleepy.

What I really wanted to study was modernism, the literature that had formed my identity as a reader and, in many ways, as a person. Joyce, Conrad, Faulkner, Nabokov: complex, difficult, sophisticated works. Like so many young men, I needed to think of myself as a rebel, and modernism, with its revolutionary intensity, confirmed my self-image. I'd pass my days in a cloud of angry sarcasm, making silent speeches, as I stalked down Broadway in my John Lennon coat, against everything conventional, respectable, and pious. I'd walk right up alongside the buildings, in the shadows—it makes you feel like a rat scuttling for cover—to aggravate my sense of alienation. If I was waiting for someone and had nowhere else to go, I'd sit right down on the sidewalk with my Kerouac or my *Catch-22*, just you try and stop me. I smoked weed, listened to the Clash, and snorted at the business monkeys who'd sold out to the Man. Like the modernists, I was hot to change the world, even if I wasn't sure exactly how. At the very least, I knew I wasn't going to let the world change me. I was Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, raging against the machine. I was Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, the rebel artist who runs rings around the grown-ups. I was Conrad's Marlow, the world-weary truth teller who punches through hypocrisy and lies.

Needless to say, I was not the easiest person to get along with. In fact, I wonder that my friends put up with me at all. Like so many guys, I thought that a good conversation meant holding forth about all the supposedly important things I knew: books, history, politics, whatever. But I wasn't just aggressively certain of myself—

though of course I never let anyone finish a sentence and delivered my opinions as if they'd come direct from Sinai. I was also oblivious to the feelings of the people around me, a bulldozer stuck in overdrive, because it had never occurred to me to imagine how things might look from someone else's point of view.

My best friend, who knew me better than I knew myself, once introduced me to a friend of hers named Honour. Just as I was gearing up to reel off all the stupid puns I could think of—"Your Honor," "Honored to meet you," and so forth—my friend caught the smirk spreading across my face and cut me off before I could make an idiot of myself. "Billy," she explained with the weary patience with which you might address a difficult child, "she's already heard them all." Basically, I had no insight into myself or anyone else.

My romantic life, not surprisingly, had never been particularly happy. I was stuck at the time in a relationship that should have ended long before. We had jumped each other one night the previous summer, and though we'd been together for over a year, we had little in common and had never much progressed beyond the sex. She was gorgeous, bisexual, impulsive, experienced, with a look that knew things and a laugh that didn't give a damn. We would go to bed, and then we would go dancing, and then we would go to bed again.

But as for anything like real intimacy, I just couldn't manage it. I'd had girlfriends before, including ones I'd even thought I'd loved, but things had always ended badly: fights, sulks, head games, tears. Eventually, good riddance. At least this time we didn't fight. We didn't talk, either—not about anything real, not about what was going on with us or what we might have been feeling. Instead, I'd hold forth as usual, even think I was doing her a favor in the process. I was a graduate student at Columbia, after all, and she had barely scraped through college. I was going to do something important with my life, and she was marking time as a waitress—a job that struck me as depressingly unambitious—while she tried to figure out her next move. In short, I didn't respect her enough to imagine that she might have anything to say to me that was worth listening to.

I knew it wasn't a real relationship, but I kept telling myself that this was what I'd always wanted. A steady supply of sex, with no strings attached: a teenage boy's idea of paradise. Except I wasn't a teenage boy anymore. Still, I thought—and this is how numb I was by then—well, so maybe I never will find that one person to love. So what? I knew, deep down, that the idea of doing without love for the rest of my life was completely absurd, that it was a sign of grave emotional peril that it could even occur to me, but I managed to keep the lid on my denial. Besides, I thought, as soon as you fell in love, people started expecting you to get married. And if there was one thing I knew, it was that I was never going to get married.



My second year in graduate school, I signed up for a class called Studies in the Novel, less because I knew anything about it than because it sounded like a good fit. Our first two books were *Madame Bovary*, the novel that raised the art of fiction to a new level

of cultural esteem, and *The Ambassadors*, Henry James's most honored masterpiece. So far, my need to study prestigious literature was being satisfied.

Then came *Emma*. I had heard some scattered talk, over the years, about its supposed greatness—one of the best novels in the language, more complex than anything in Joyce or Proust—but at first, my prejudices against Jane Austen were only confirmed. Everything was so unbearably banal. The story seemed to consist of nothing more than a lot of chitchat among a bunch of commonplace characters in a country village. No grand events, no great issues, and, inexplicably for a writer of romance novels, not even any passion.

Emma, it turned out, was Emma Woodhouse, “handsome, clever, and rich,” who lived with her feeble, foolish old father on their family estate of Hartfield. Her life was impossibly narrow. Her mother had died when she was a baby; her sister, Isabella, lived in London; and the governess who had raised her had just gotten married. Mr. Woodhouse himself was too much of a hypochondriac to even venture off the estate, and his best friends, who were forever dropping by, consisted of a sad, silly spinster named Miss Bates and her elderly mother, the widow of the old clergyman.

This was a pretty unpromising bunch of people to begin with, and then all they seemed to do was sit around and *talk*: about who was sick, who had had a card party the night before, who had said what to whom. Mr. Woodhouse's idea of a big time was taking a stroll around the garden. Reading the mail was the highlight of everybody's day, and a shopping trip to Highbury, the little village near Hartfield where the Bateses lived—and where there seemed to be a total of one store—counted for the heroine as a major event.

I couldn't believe how trivial this all was. In my other classes, D. H. Lawrence was preaching sexual revolution and Norman Mailer was cursing his way through World War II, and here I was reading about card parties. One whole chapter—Isabella had just brought her family home for Christmas—consisted entirely of aimless talk, as everyone caught up on one another's news. For more than half a dozen pages, the plot simply came to a halt. But the truth was, for long stretches of the book there really wasn't much plot to speak of. Things happened, story lines developed, but no single issue, no point of suspense, moved the story forward—especially not the one I'd been led to expect, the one about the heroine's romantic future, which the book hardly even seemed to address.

What was the point of all those long, rambling speeches by Emma's father? Here he was, talking to Emma about Isabella's sons:

*Henry is a fine boy, but John is very like his mama. Henry is the eldest, he was named after me, not after his father. John, the second, is named after his father. Some people are surprised, I believe, that the eldest was not, but Isabella would have him called Henry, which I thought very pretty of her. And he is a very clever boy, indeed. They are all remarkably clever; and they have so many pretty ways. They will come and stand by my chair, and say, “Grandpapa, can you give me a bit of string?” and once Henry asked me for a knife, but I told him knives were only made for grandpapas.*

Emma undoubtedly knew all this, had heard it a hundred times. The information wasn't for our benefit, either. The boys, their cleverness, and their desire for knives and string played no role whatsoever in the story. And we knew by then that Emma's

father was a tedious old man. So why did we have to listen to this?

Mr. Woodhouse, what was more, was nothing compared to Miss Bates. He drove by the paragraph; she prosed by the page. I'd be sitting in a coffee shop, surrounded by people reading Kierkegaard or Chomsky, and get to a paragraph like this, where she told Emma about a letter she had just received from her niece, Jane Fairfax. Or tried to, anyway:

*Oh! here it is. I was sure it could not be far off; but I had put my huswife upon it, you see, without being aware, and so it was quite hid, but I had it in my hand so very lately that I was almost sure it must be on the table. I was reading it to Mrs. Cole, and since she went away, I was reading it again to my mother, for it is such a pleasure to her—a letter from Jane—that she can never hear it often enough; so I knew it could not be far off, and here it is, only just under my huswife—and since you are so kind as to wish to hear what she says;—but, first of all, I really must, in justice to Jane, apologize for her writing so short a letter—only two pages you see—hardly two—and in general she fills the whole paper and crosses half. . . .*

And that was only the first part of the speech, and we didn't get to hear what the letter actually said for another page after that.

Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates—the dull old man, the scatterbrained neighbor—were the kind of people I tuned out in real life. I'd stare past them and hurry on my way, or nod absentmindedly and think about how I needed to get my library books renewed. I certainly didn't want to spend my time reading about them.

The funny thing was, the heroine agreed with me. If I was bored with Highbury, so was Emma. She didn't think that anything interesting was going on there either, and what little plot the novel had involved her determination to get things moving on her own. I wasn't sure how I felt about this. On the one hand, I sympathized with her. On the other, she went about everything so blindly and willfully, and all her schemes turned out to be such disasters, that I found myself cringing almost every time she opened her mouth.

Early on, casting about for something to do, Emma struck up a friendship with a girl named Harriet Smith. Harriet was docile, ignorant, and naïve—a worshipful younger friend who flattered Emma's vanity in every way. She was also very pretty—“short, plump, and fair, with a fine bloom, blue eyes, light hair, and a look of great sweetness”—and that gave Emma an idea. “Those soft blue eyes, and all those natural graces,” she thought, “should not be wasted.” Harriet “wanted only a little more knowledge and elegance to be quite perfect.” And so, like Henry Higgins sizing up Eliza Doolittle, Emma decided to turn her friend into a project. “She would improve her . . . and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners. It would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life.”

This was really too much. Such arrogance, such nosiness—and from someone who was all of twenty herself, and scarcely less naïve than her friend. Emma gave herself credit for bringing about her governess's marriage with a local gentleman—though all she'd really done was guess that it would happen—and now she set about arranging a

match for Harriet with Mr. Elton, the new clergyman. The idea was ridiculous—Harriet was the illegitimate daughter of an unknown father, with no money or social standing—but Emma convinced herself otherwise.

Worse, she convinced her friend, persuading Harriet to turn down a proposal from a worthy young farmer, Mr. Martin, whom Harriet liked very much. The scene was excruciating, like watching someone torture a puppy:

*“You think I ought to refuse him then,” said Harriet, looking down.*

*“Ought to refuse him! My dear Harriet, what do you mean? Are you in any doubt as to that? I thought—but I beg your pardon, perhaps I have been under a mistake. I certainly have been misunderstanding you, if you feel in doubt as to the purport of your answer. I had imagined you were consulting me only as to the wording of it.”*

*Harriet was silent. With a little reserve of manner, Emma continued:*

*“You mean to return a favourable answer, I collect.”*

*“No, I do not; that is, I do not mean—What shall I do? What would you advise me to do? Pray, dear Miss Woodhouse, tell me what I ought to do.” . . .*

*“Not for the world,” said Emma, smiling graciously, “would I advise you either way.”*

Now I really couldn't stand her. To play with someone else's happiness, whether she knew it or not, simply for the sake of her own vanity! Just as Emma thought that no one in Highbury was good enough for her, so did she think that Mr. Martin wasn't good enough for her friend—not because she thought so much of Harriet, but just because she was *her* friend. In the same way, she knew that Miss Bates and her mother were lonely women, teetering on the edge of poverty, and that a visit from her always made their day, but she could never bring herself to drop by as often as she knew she should, and when she did show up, she would find an excuse to run away as fast as possible. Jane Fairfax, Miss Bates's niece, was an intelligent, talented, gracious young woman, right around the heroine's age, who came to Highbury for a couple of months every year—but Emma did all she could to avoid her. Any relative of the lowly Miss Bates, after all, could hardly be a suitable companion for the great Emma Woodhouse.

Eventually, Emma's bored disdain for the people around her led her to her very worst moment. Frank Churchill, her governess's stepson, had come to Highbury for a visit. Frank was lively, good-looking, a little bit of a bad boy, and he played up to Emma so extravagantly that her head grew bigger than ever. It was summer, and they all decided to go on a picnic: Emma, Frank, Harriet, Jane Fairfax, Miss Bates, Mr. Elton—everyone who mattered. When they actually got there, though, Emma and Frank's flirtation was so oppressive to everybody else that they all soon found themselves sitting around with nothing to say. So Frank devised a happy plan to have them entertain the grand young lady. “Here are seven of you,” he announced, “and she only demands from each of you either one thing very clever, . . . or two things moderately clever, . . . or three things very dull indeed.” Poor, harmless Miss Bates, who knew perfectly well how tedious everybody found her, was left feeling very self-conscious. “Oh! very well,” she exclaimed, “then I need not be uneasy. ‘Three things very dull indeed.’ That will just do for me, you know. I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth, shan't I?”

And that was when Emma, carried away by Frank's flattery and her own sense of

effortless superiority, hit bottom. “Ah! ma’am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me—but you will be limited as to number—only three at once.” It was a shocking piece of cruelty, all the worse for the way that its victim received it:

*Miss Bates, deceived by the mock ceremony of her manner, did not immediately catch her meaning; but, when it burst on her, it could not anger, though a slight blush shewed that it could pain her.*

*“Ah!—well—to be sure. Yes, I see what she means, . . . and I will try to hold my tongue. I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend.”*

And that was when I finally understood what Austen had been up to all along. Emma’s cruelty, which I was so quick to criticize, was nothing, I saw, but the mirror image of my own. The boredom and contempt that the book aroused were not signs of Austen’s ineptitude; they were the exact responses she wanted me to have. She had incited them, in order to expose them. By creating a heroine who felt exactly as I did, and who behaved precisely as I would have in her situation, she was showing me my own ugly face. I couldn’t deplore Emma’s disdain for Miss Bates, or her boredom with the whole commonplace Highbury world, without simultaneously condemning my own.

Austen, I realized, had not been writing about everyday things because she couldn’t think of anything else to talk about. She had been writing about them because she wanted to show how important they really are. All that trivia hadn’t been marking time until she got to the point. It was the point. Austen wasn’t silly and superficial; she was much, much smarter—and much wiser—than I could ever have imagined.

I returned to the novel in a completely different frame of mind. Mr. Woodhouse’s banalities, Miss Bates’s monologues, all that gossip and small talk—Austen put them in as a sign that she respected her characters, not because she wanted us to look down on them. She was willing to listen to what they had to say, and she wanted me to listen, too. As long as I had treated such passages as filler and hurried through them, they had seemed impossibly dull. But once I started to slow down long enough to take them on their own terms, I found that they possessed their own gravity, their own dignity, their own sweetness.

Jane Fairfax’s letters and where they may have been hiding, little John and Henry’s cleverness and pretty ways—these things mattered, because they mattered to the characters themselves. They made up the texture of their lives, and gave their existence its savor. I got it now. By eliminating all the big, noisy events that usually absorb our interest when we read novels—the adventures and affairs, the romances and the crises, even, at times, the plot—Austen was asking us to pay attention to the things we usually miss or don’t accord enough esteem, in novels or in life. Those small, “trivial,” everyday things, the things that happen hour by hour to the people in our lives: what your nephew said, what your friend heard, what your neighbor did. That, she was telling us, is what the fabric of our years really consists of. That is what life is really about.

Even Emma knew this. She just didn’t know she knew it. “There was not a creature in the world,” Austen wrote about her governess, Mrs. Weston, to whom the heroine spoke “with such unreserve”:

*not any one, to whom she related with such conviction of being listened to and*

*understood, of being always interesting and always intelligible, the little affairs, arrangements, perplexities, and pleasures of her father and herself. She could tell nothing of Hartfield, in which Mrs. Weston had not a lively concern; and half an hour's uninterrupted communication of all those little matters on which the daily happiness of private life depends, was one of the first gratifications of each.*

Emma was always looking in the wrong direction. Her heart was in the right place—that was what ultimately made me forgive her, and, finally, what saved her—but her busy brain led her astray. While she plotted her schemes and dreamed her dreams, her “daily happiness” was right there in front of her, in “affairs, arrangements, perplexities, and pleasures”—the hourly ordinary, in all its granular specificity.

The novel had a name for this gossipy texture of daily life, a word I stumbled upon again and again. “Many little particulars”; “I am impatient for a thousand particulars”; “She will give you all the minute particulars.” Not just particulars, but “little” particulars, “minute” particulars. Life is lived at the level of the little. In fact, I now saw, it was remarkable just how many things in the novel were “little.” “Little particulars.” “Little affairs, arrangements, perplexities, and pleasures.” Harriet Smith was “little,” always. Her friends the Martins had “a little Welch cow, a very pretty little Welch cow,” and a little gazebo in the garden, just big enough to hold a dozen people. The story took place entirely within the vicinity of Highbury, and space itself seemed contracted by the smallness of the frame. The distance between Emma’s house and Mrs. Weston’s was only half a mile, yet it was made to seem like an arduous journey. Though *Emma* was over four hundred pages long, its whole scale was little, like a crowded scene inscribed upon a miniature.

If I was having trouble seeing the importance of the world that Austen was putting in front of me, in other words, it wasn’t entirely my fault. Like all the great teachers, I now saw, she made us come to her. She had momentous truths to tell, but she concealed them in humble packages. Her “littleness” was really an optical illusion, a test. Jesus spoke in parables so his disciples would have to make an effort to understand him. The truth, he knew, cannot be grasped in any other way. Austen reminded me, I realized, of something that Plato said about his great mentor Socrates, who also taught by telling stories. “His words are ridiculous when you first hear them, for his talk is of pack-asses and smiths and cobblers . . . so that any ignorant or inexperienced person might feel disposed to laugh at him; but he who sees what is within will find that they are the only words which have a meaning in them, and likewise the most divine.”

Austen’s words, quite apart from what she said with them, also struck me as ridiculous when I first heard them. I was used to stylistic brilliance that hit you over the head: Joyce’s syntactic labyrinths, Nabokov’s arcane vocabulary, Hemingway’s bleached-bone austerities. So what was I supposed to make of passages like this, near the start of the novel?

*Mr. Woodhouse was fond of society in his own way. He liked very much to have his friends come and see him; and from various united causes, from his long residence at Hartfield, and his good nature, from his*

*fortune, his house, and his daughter, he could command the visits of his own little circle, in a great measure, as he liked. He had not much intercourse with any families beyond that circle; his horror of late hours, and large dinner-parties, made him unfit for any acquaintance but such as would visit him on his own terms.*

No metaphors, no images, no flights of lyricism. This hardly seemed like writing at all. Aside from the slightly dated vocabulary, it was more like talking.

But then I started to look more carefully. Mr. Woodhouse was, in the language of Austen's day, a valetudinarian, or sort of professional invalid. No one seemed weaker, no one more powerless. And yet in just three sentences, by the subtlest of means, Austen established him as a man who used that weakness to control the world around him. There were fewer than a hundred words in that passage, and fully seventeen, nearly one in five, were pronouns that referred to him: "he," "him," "his." "His" fortune, "his" house, "his" daughter—everything, as it were, was "his." The passage started with his name, and his power was affirmed at the end of every sentence. He did things "in his own way," "as he liked," and "on his own terms."

This, I now saw, was how all of Austen's language worked. No strain, no display, no effort to awe or impress. Just everyday words in their natural order—a language that didn't call attention to itself in any way, but just rolled along as easily as breathing. It wasn't the words that Austen used that created her effects, it was the way she used them, the way she grouped and balanced them. And so it was, I saw, with her characters. A thousand authors could write novels about ordinary people, but only one of those books would be *Emma*. Austen's characters came to seem so vivid, so meaningful, because she put them down on the page exactly the way she placed her words: without condescension, without apology, but with a masterful talent for arrangement. Emma was balanced by Jane Fairfax, and Miss Bates by Harriet Smith, and Mr. Martin by Mr. Elton, and all of them by one another, setting the whole story in motion and creating scenes that felt as natural as real life. It didn't matter how small the frame was, because it contained a whole world.

As it turned out, people had been reacting to Jane Austen exactly as I had for as long as they'd been reading her. The first reviews warned that readers might find her stories "trifling," with "no great variety," "extremely deficient" in imagination and "entirely devoid of invention," with "so little narrative" that it was hard to even describe what they were about. Austen herself, who liked to collect her friends' and family's opinions of her books, recorded that a certain Mrs. Guiton found *Emma* "too natural to be interesting." Madame de Staël, an illustrious French intellectual, thought her work "*vulgaire*"—which makes it just as well that Austen declined to meet her formidable contemporary at a London dinner party when she had the chance.

Austen knew that she wasn't creating for just anybody. "I do not write for such dull Elves," she said of *Pride and Prejudice*, adapting some lines of poetry, "As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves." And *Emma*, she knew, would be the hardest challenge of all. "I am going to take a heroine," she said as she was about to start working on the novel, "whom no-one but myself will much like."

But from the beginning, there were readers of discernment who recognized her genius behind the façade. No less a judge than Sir Walter Scott, the leading writer of her day, author of epic poems and sweeping historical novels like *Ivanhoe* and *The Bride of Lammermoor*, confessed her superiority:

*That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The Big Bow-wow strain I can do myself like any now going; but the exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting, from the truth of description and sentiment, is denied me.*

Another critic poked fun at readers who thought that there could be but “little merit in making characters act and talk so exactly like the people whom they saw around them every day,” not recognizing that, as with Mozart or Rembrandt, the highest art lies in concealing art. Such readers, he joked, were like the man who couldn’t see why everyone was making a big fuss about a certain celebrated actor, “who merely behaved on the stage as anybody might be expected to in real life.”

Her reputation slowly grew, but by the late 1800s there were only two opinions about Jane Austen. Either you loved her or you hated her. Mark Twain, a famously exuberant hater, swore that reading Austen made him feel “like a barkeep entering the kingdom of heaven.” “It seems a great pity to me,” he taunted an Austen fan, “that they allowed her to die a natural death.” “Every time I read *Pride and Prejudice*,” he told another friend, “I want to dig her up and hit her over the skull with her own shinbone.”

But if you loved her—if you “got” her—you felt like you’d joined a secret club, with its own code words and special signs and degrees of initiation. It was a creed, in the words of one writer, “as ardent as a religion,” and “a real appreciation of *Emma*,” her subtlest book of all, was “the final test of citizenship in her kingdom.” Rudyard Kipling, very much a citizen himself, celebrated the phenomenon in “The Janeites,” a story about Austen worship in, of all places, the trenches of World War I. “Jane?” says Humberstall, the simple-minded veteran at the heart of the story—

*Why, she was a little old maid ’oo’d written ’alf a dozen books about a hundred years ago. ’Twasn’t as if there was anythin’ to them, either. I know. I had to read ’em. They weren’t adventurous, nor smutty, nor what you’d call even interestin’—all about girls o’ seventeen . . . , not certain ’oom they’d like to marry; an’ their dances an’ card-parties an’ picnics, and their young blokes goin’ off to London on ’orseback for ’air-cuts an’ shaves. [Which is exactly what Frank Churchill does in *Emma*.]*

Yet once Humberstall was accepted into the brotherhood—“it’s a very select Society, an’ you’ve got to be a Janeite in your ’eart”—he came to understand her true worth. “I read all her six books now for pleasure ’tween times in the shop. . . . You take it from me, Brethren, there’s no one to touch Jane when you’re in a tight place. Gawd bless ’er, whoever she was.”

The very first review of *Emma* was written by none other than Sir Walter Scott himself. If people had trouble recognizing the value of the novel’s portrait of daily life,

he said, if they thought of it as a book in which “nothing happened,” that’s because they were so used to reading novels in which all too *many* things happened. Austen lived in the great age of trash fiction: the gothic novel, the sentimental novel, the bodice ripper—crumbling castles, creaking doors, and secret passageways; heavenly maidens and dark seducers, piercing shrieks and floods of tears, wild rides and breathless escapes; shipwrecks, deathbeds, abductions, avowals; poverty, misery, rape, and incest. And of course, at the last minute, by grace of the author and a heap of coincidences, a happy ending.

Austen herself made delirious fun of this kind of nonsense when she was young. Her juvenilia—the satirical skits and sketches she produced as a girl for the entertainment of her large, literate, fun-loving family, some of which were written when she was no more than twelve—are full of wicked parodies of this fashionable fluff. In one story, two young heroines, highly sensitive in the accepted style, “faint alternately on a sofa.” In another, an infant girl is discovered, perfectly unharmed and already able to talk, under a haystack. In a third, a young man has “so dazzling a Beauty that none but Eagles could look him in the Face.” People fall in love at the drop of a hat, children pilfer their parents’ savings, and a man discovers four long-lost grandchildren in rapid succession.

In other words, Austen knew exactly what she was doing when she created her fiction of ordinary life. It didn’t happen by default, as if she never really thought about it and simply did what came naturally. It was a revolutionary artistic choice, a courageous defiance of convention and expectation: exactly why so many of her early readers had trouble appreciating what she had done, and why her fame took so long to establish itself.

Yet she did more than reject the literary formulas of her day. Her own life may have seemed uneventful: she lived in a quiet corner of the English countryside, never married, never traveled more than about a hundred miles from home, didn’t publish her first novel until she was thirty-five, and died, still sharing a house with her mother and sister, just six years later. But she lived amid a host of dramatic events, both global in scope and closer to home. Born in 1775, the year that launched the American Revolution, she was a teenager during the French Revolution and an adult during the Napoleonic Wars—a quarter century of epic struggle between Great Britain and France that climaxed at Waterloo just two years before her death. Her life also coincided with the most dynamic phase of the conquest of India, and thus, the rise of the British Empire.

Though they seem remote from her quiet existence, these events touched her very closely. Her father’s bright, pretty sister, endowed with the striking name of Philadelphia, went out to India as a young woman, like so many girls at the time, to find herself a husband from among the mass of ambitious young men who had gone to the booming colony to seek their fortune. Not only did she find one, she may have also found a lover in the person of Warren Hastings, the brilliant young administrator who was on his way to becoming the first governor-general of India and one of the most important figures in the history of the Raj. From then on, the Austen and Hastings families would remain intertwined. Philadelphia, childless for the first eight years of her marriage, gave birth to a daughter within two years of meeting her husband’s new business associate. The girl’s name, Eliza, was the same as that of Hastings’s daughter,

who had died in infancy. Hastings, a widower, not only acted as Eliza's godfather and later gave her the spanking sum of ten thousand pounds, he also sent his young son back to England to be raised in the home of Philadelphia's newly married brother—that is, Jane Austen's father himself.

Austen never knew the boy, for he died of diphtheria within a few months. But she did come to know her cousin Eliza, who went on to live another remarkable story, very well indeed. Philadelphia had returned to England along with her husband when their daughter was three. When Eliza was nineteen—she had grown up to be a lively, beautiful, and flirtatious young woman—she married a French count and acquired the glamorous name of Capot de Feuillide. A few years later—Jane was ten by now—Madame de Feuillide descended upon the Austens' sleepy parsonage in all the glory of her French stories and French fashions. Despite the age difference, the two cousins formed a close and loving friendship that lasted to the end of the older woman's life.

Meanwhile, Warren Hastings, returned to England after twelve years as the master of British India, was impeached for corruption by the House of Commons and embroiled in the most spectacular trial of Austen's day. The ordeal dragged on for seven years, followed by the Austens with intense partisanship on behalf of their patron, and finally ended in Hastings's acquittal. By that point, however, Eliza had become entangled in the French Revolution. Her husband lost his estates; Madame la Comtesse, as she liked to be called, was prevented from returning to France; and at last—Eliza herself was probably taking refuge with the Austens at the time—the count himself was sent to the guillotine. And then, before long, in a turn toward the family with which she had become so close, Eliza married Austen's older brother Henry, ten years younger than herself.

The Napoleonic Wars came even closer to home. Two of Austen's other brothers (she had six in all) joined the Royal Navy, Britain's proudest institution and first line of defense—Frank, a year older than she, and Charles, the baby, four years younger. Frank sailed to the Far East, fought in the Mediterranean, made captain by the age of twenty-six, narrowly missed the great victory at Trafalgar—a bitter regret—but chased the French across the Atlantic, played a leading role in the Battle of San Domingo, the last major naval engagement of the conflict, and fought the Americans in the War of 1812. Charles, less lucky in his career, still saw his share of perilous action, helping to run down one French warship in a chase of some two hundred miles, capturing another from a small boat in a heavy storm, hunting Napoleon's allies after the emperor's escape from Elba, and fighting Greek pirates in the Aegean. Austen, needless to say, followed all of these events—by letter, by rumor, through newspaper reports, and in her brothers' own stories when they returned home on leave—with breathless interest.

Her neighbors were scarcely less colorful. The cast of characters included “military heroes, bastard sprigs of the aristocracy, ruined squires,” and “brilliant factory-owners of foreign origin,” as Austen biographer Claire Tomalin enumerates them. One, Lord Portsmouth, was a feeble-minded aristocrat with a macabre taste for funerals and slaughterhouses. After his first wife died, he was swindled into marrying his lawyer's daughter (Lord Byron was a witness, though he seemed unaware of what was going on), who proceeded to dismiss the servants and tyrannize her husband with regular whippings and beatings—gothic stuff indeed.

Tales of India and France, high-seas adventure and high-society scandal—godsends, it would seem, for any novelist in search of material. Yet Austen turned them all aside with a polite smile. Rather than Warren Hastings and Elizabeth Capot de Feuillide, she preferred to write about people like Mr. Woodhouse and Harriet Smith. Instead of Napoleonic battles and clandestine torture, she chose the dramatic possibilities of card parties and country picnics. She knew what she was about, and refused all temptations to wander from her course. After *Emma* was dedicated, at his own invitation, to the prince regent—Great Britain’s acting monarch during the senility of his father, George III—Austen heard again from the prince’s librarian, a pompous clergyman named James Stanier Clarke, who had been serving as the regent’s intermediary. (The prince did not of course deal with Austen himself, even if she was one of his favorite writers.) Clarke took the liberty of inflicting upon her that common torment of successful authors: he gave her an idea for a book. “Any Historical Romance illustrative of the History of the august house of Cobourg,” the German noble family whose youngest son was about to marry the Prince’s daughter, “would just now be very interesting,” he helpfully explained.

*but . . . I could not sit seriously down to write a serious Romance under any other motive than to save my Life, & if it were indispensable for me to keep it up & never relax into laughing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first Chapter.—No—I must keep to my own style & go on in my own Way.*

“I am fully sensible that an Historical Romance . . . might be much more to the purpose of Profit or Popularity, than such pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in,” Austen replied (“romance” here meaning something like “saga”)—Her own way was to make art out of the very things that absorbed her attention in her own life. No one was closer to her than her older sister, Cassandra, with whom she shared a room until the end of her life. The two exchanged hundreds of letters during their periods of separation, filled with exactly the kind of gossipy detail that Austen shaped so gloriously into her novels:

*Martha & I dined yesterday at Deane to meet the Powletts & Tom Chute. . . . Mrs. Powlett was at once expensively & nakedly dress’d;—we have had the satisfaction of estimating her Lace and her Muslin [in other words, guessing how much they cost]; & she said too little to afford us much other amusement.—Mrs. John Lyford is so much pleased with the state of widowhood as to be going to put in for being a widow again;—she is to marry a Mr. Fendall, . . . a man of very good fortune, but considerably older than herself.*

*You will not expect to hear that I was asked to dance—but I was—by the Gentleman whom we met that Sunday with Capt. D’auvergne. We have always kept up a Bowling acquaintance since, & being pleased with his black eyes, I spoke to him at the Ball, which brought on me this civility; but I do not know his name,—& he seems so little at home in the English Language that I believe his black eyes may be the best of him.*