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# 30-Day Journey

with Jane Austen

*Compiled and Edited by Natasha Duquette*

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30-DAY JOURNEY WITH JANE AUSTEN

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Interior design: Paul Soupiset

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## Introduction

Jane Austen was born in the church rectory of Steventon, Hampshire, England, on December 16, 1775. She was the seventh child, and second girl, of the Reverend George Austen and Cassandra Austen. The couple would have one more boy, and her father taught male students who boarded at the rectory, so she grew up in a masculine atmosphere. Perhaps this is what led to her sister Cassandra playing the role of dearest confidante. Much of the biographical information we have about Jane Austen arises from letters to her sister.

Austen was writing with an ironic edge from an early age, contributing at least one satirical piece to her older brother James's monthly magazine, *The Loiterer*, and constructing outrageously comic narratives in private notebooks. Within her early writing, Austen's laughter at the ridiculous includes her own foibles, as evidenced by the title of her *History of England from the Reign of Henry VI to the Death of Charles I: By a Partial, Prejudiced & Ignorant Historian*. This was a collaborative project for which Cassandra painted caricatures of monarchs the sisters disliked, such as Edward IV and Queen Elizabeth I.

In her youth, Austen imbibed aspects of an Oxford education from both her father and two of her brothers, James and Henry. While James was at Oxford,

she and Cassandra were sent to Oxfordshire at the ages of seven and nine, respectively, to be educated by Mrs. Cawley, the widow of a former principal of Brasenose College. This attempted feminine education was unsuccessful and short. Nevertheless, Austen had a taste of Oxford culture and discourse, which left an imprint on her writing. One can detect the structure of Aristotelian tragedy in her mature novels—for example, Saint Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions* most likely influenced her depictions of characters learning from mistakes and growing into love. Saint Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* may have inspired her deft balance of reason and mystery.

As an Anglican growing up in a church rectory that doubled as a school, Austen participated in a religious community informed by a rich intellectual tradition and dynamic engagement with the arts. Her family provided a supportive audience for her first drafts, read aloud, and she participated in theatrical productions that took place in the Steventon barn. She played roles from the earthy Tom Thumb in *The Life and Death of Tom Thumb* to the conniving Mrs. Candour in Richard Sheridan's *School for Scandal*. Hers was definitely not a puritan upbringing. Rev. George Austen was a progressive, latitudinarian clergyman who took pride in his daughter's intellectual gifts. He bought her expensive paper and writing tools to encourage her. On November 1, 1797, Rev. Austen wrote publisher

Thomas Cadell to present his daughter's novel *First Impressions*, an early draft of *Pride and Prejudice*. It was promptly rejected. In 1802, the still-unpublished Jane Austen received a proposal of marriage from Harris Bigg-Wither, which she accepted and then pulled out of the next day. She never married and would focus instead on producing novels she referred to as her children.

The death of her father in 1805 hit Austen hard, and her writing output stagnated for almost five years as she, her mother, and her sister moved between temporary homes in Bath, Bristol, and Southampton. In 1809, Edward Austen-Knight invited his mother and sisters to come live in Chawton Cottage, a small home on one of his country estates. Settled back into her beloved rural Hampshire, deploying a small, portable writing desk her father had given her, Austen began to revise early material and compose fresh stories. In quick succession, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park* were published by Thomas Egerton in 1811, 1813, and 1814, respectively. John Murray published *Emma* in 1815.

From 1813 onward, Austen also began to experience chronic pain, especially headaches. By spring of 1816, the inflammation had spread to her back and knee. She struggled with fevers and fatigue. Remarkably, she persevered in writing, and by August 1816 her

novel *Persuasion* was finished. Early 1817 saw her starting a new novel, *Sanditon*, a satire of an upstart seaside resort visited by invalids. It is remarkable Austen could laugh at this subject as her own health was in sharp decline.

On March 18, 1817, Austen stopped writing, physically unable to continue, and in May she was taken by Cassandra to the city of Winchester for treatment by a specialist. Doctors today believe she was suffering from either Addison's or Hodgkin's disease. She died in Winchester on July 18, 1817. Her tombstone in Winchester Cathedral praises her "extraordinary endowments of mind" as well as "charity, devotion, faith, and purity." After her death, her brother Henry ushered *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* into publication, bound together as one book and introduced by his biographical notice on the author. Up to this point, Austen had chosen to publish her work anonymously.

Austen's readers return to her novels again and again for the sense of a kindred spirit winking at us as she exposes the vanities and follies of human existence. She delighted in sharing mischievous jokes with family members. At times, her quick quips prompt readers to laugh themselves out of their own folly. Elsewhere there is pointed satire as Austen swiftly critiques destructive pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust. Her novels trace the trajectories of



characters shedding blind conceit and self-absorption to embrace clear-sighted humility and social consciousness. A desire for Christlike humility and love typifies her written prayers, found at the end of this thirty-day journey. The words of Austen out of which this journey flows arise from the six-volume *Novels of Jane Austen: The Text Based on Collations of the Early Editions*, edited by R. W. Chapman. May contemplating these sparks of brilliance sharpen your perception of reality, flash brightness into your heart, and kindle sympathy with those around you.