
Author Biography

Jane Austen, seventh of the eight children of Reverend George and Cassandra Leigh Austen, was born on December 16, 1775, in the small village of Steventon in Hampshire, England. Her childhood was happy: her home was full of books and many friends and her parents encouraged both their children's intellectual interests and their passion for producing and performing in amateur theatricals. Austen's closest relationship, one that would endure throughout her life, was with her beloved only sister, Cassandra.

From about the time she was twelve years old, Austen began writing spirited parodies of the popular Gothic and sentimental fiction of the day for the amusement of her family. Chock-full of stock characters, vapid and virtuous heroines, and improbable coincidences, these early works reveal in nascent form many of her literary gifts: particularly her ironic sensibility, wit, and gift for comedy. Attempts at more sustained, serious works began around 1794 with a novel in letters—a popular form at the time—called *Lady Susan*, and in the years immediately following with two more epistolary novels—one called *Elinor and Marianne*, the other *First Impressions*—that would evolve into *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. *Lady Susan*, later revised and entitled *Northanger Abbey*, also was begun in that period.

From 1799 to 1809, little is known of Austen's life or literary endeavors, other than that upon her father's retirement she moved unhappily from her beloved home in Steventon to Bath; that he died a few years thereafter and she moved to Southampton; and that she began, but did not complete, a novel called *The Watsons*. A move back to the country in 1808—to a cottage on one of her brother's properties in Chawton—seems to have revived her interest in writing.

Her revised version of *Elinor and Marianne*—*Sense and Sensibility*—was published, like all the work which appeared in print in her lifetime, anonymously, in 1811; and between the time *Pride and Prejudice* was accepted for publication and the time it actually appeared, she wrote *Mansfield Park*. *Emma* appeared in 1816 and was reviewed favorably by the most popular novelist of the day, Sir Walter Scott, who said:

The author's knowledge of the world, and the peculiar tact with which she presents characters that the reader cannot fail to recognize, reminds us something of the merits of the Flemish school of painting. The subjects are not often elegant, and certainly never grand; but they are finished up to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader.

Scott also insightfully pointed out *Emma*'s significance in representing the emergence of a new kind of novel, one concerned with the texture of ordinary life.

Though all her novels were concerned with courtship, love, and marriage, Austen never married. There is some evidence that she had several flirtations with eligible men in her early twenties, and speculation that in 1802 she agreed to marry the heir of a Hampshire family but then changed her mind. Austen rigorously guarded her privacy, and after her death, her family censored and destroyed many of her letters. Little is known of her personal experience or her favorite subjects. However, Austen's reputation as a "dowdy bluestocking," as literary critic Ronald Blythe points out, is far from accurate: "she loved balls, cards, wine, music, country walks, conversation, children, and bad as well as excellent novels."

In 1816, as she worked to complete her novel *Persuasion*, Austen's health began to fail. She continued to work, preparing *Northanger Abbey* for publication, and began a light-hearted, satirical work called *Sanditon* which she never finished. She died at the age of forty-two on July 18, 1817, in the arms of her beloved sister, Cassandra, of what historians now believe to have been Addison's disease.

The identity of "A Lady" who wrote the popular novels was known in her lifetime only to her family and a few elite readers, among them the Prince Regent, who invited Austen to visit his library and "permitted" her to dedicate *Emma* to him (unaware, no doubt, that she loathed him). But Austen deliberately avoided literary circles; in Ronald Blythe's words, "literature, not the literary life, was always her intention." It was not until the December following her death, when *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published, that "a biographical notice of the author" by Austen's brother Henry appeared in the books, revealing to the reading public for the first time the name of Jane Austen.