

Pride without Prejudice

by
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The very recent stamp series in the UK on the novels of Jane Austen bears closer scrutiny – not only for the artwork, but the cohesion displayed in the series, which highlight the major literary works of this early nineteenth century author of high repute. The British Royal Mail can take much pride, without any prejudice, on this achievement. Additionally, of course, it will enlighten a wider audience to these novels which will accordingly receive a higher readership than would have been the case without the stamp issue. A case of everyone wins – especially the reader and collector.

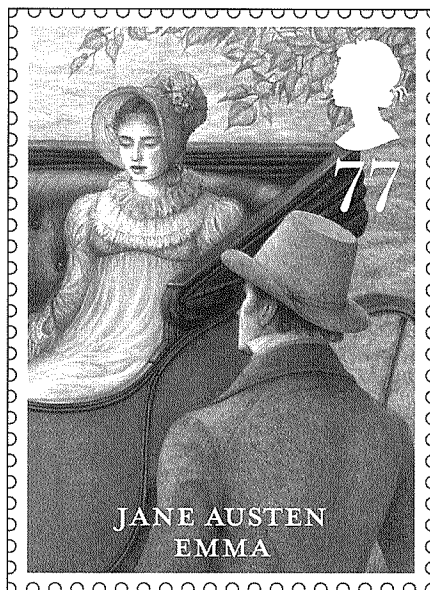


Fig.1 Emma, on the 1st class stamp

Jane Austen's house has fortunately been preserved much as she knew it, and a visit to it on a summer's day is well recommended. This writer has been twice, with years between, and the second visit was no less rewarding than the first. It exists in the winding main street of the village of Chawton, two miles south of the town of Alton, in Hampshire, England, and known as Chawton Cottage.

Although Jane Austen was an author from an extremely young age, her gift could not be fulfilled because for many years she could not find a willing publisher. This frustration and delay was to her ultimate advantage, as it allowed her skills to mature and be enhanced. All her stories are of private life and turn on personal relationships – that is their strength. Neither revolution nor war at that time is written about, as they did not inspire her, and play no part in private and domestic life. Excluding early juvenile work and poetry, her completed novels number six, and were published between 1811 and 1817. All her plots have happy endings – there are no deaths in them or scenes of violence or crime. Perhaps the better for it!

The Royal Mail set of six stamps, each portraying a scene from a different work, has these in correct order of publication and stamp face value, and we will look briefly at each stamp and what it portrays. The set is divided in to three pairs, two for 1st class post, two at 77p, and two at £1-28. *Sense and Sensibility* was published

in 1811, when Jane was aged 36, only five years before her death at age 41. This 1st class stamp shows the Dashwood sisters, Elinor and Marianne, who are in an illuminating plot of love, romance and heartbreak, that verges on serious drama. Elinor is seen reading a letter to her younger sister, Marianne, who has neglected her health through misery. But, eventually, all ends well with marriage and happiness for both.

It can be said that Jane Austen never wrote anything better than *Pride and Prejudice*, presenting us with a convincing picture of ordinary life and managing at the same time to be continuously entertaining, even with an occasional touch of exuberant caricature. Centring on the story of the Bennet family with a mother of five daughters who is most concerned with the family's fortunes, the characters of the daughters are well drawn and different. The story is mainly seen through the eyes of Elizabeth Bennet, and with many twists and turns, she eventually accepts the hand in marriage of Mr Darcy – both of them previously having displayed pride and prejudice. The 1st class stamp portrays a view of Elizabeth Bennet looking at a portrait of Fitzwilliam Darcy.

In 1812, she finished *Pride and Prejudice* and sent it to her publisher, starting a new novel, *Mansfield Park*, the subject of the third stamp, and first at 77p.



Fig.3 Portrait of Jane Austen

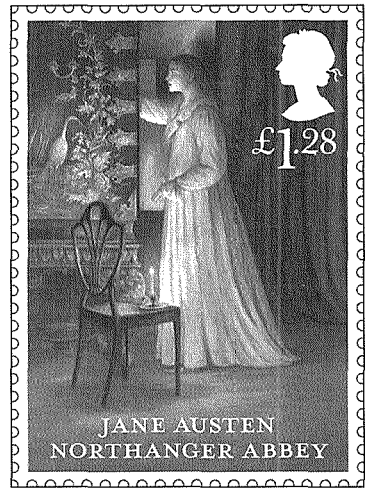


Fig.2 Northanger Abbey, on the £1-28 stamp

Written at Chawton Cottage, we have the most controversial of the six novels, with a story containing much social satire. The heroine, Fanny Price, is sent to live at Mansfield Park with a rich aunt and uncle and her four older cousins. She is considered somewhat as a poor relation, and only cousin Edmund treats her well. As ever with Jane Austen, there is a list of other characters who come and go, and through their actions, cause heartache and joy. Eventually, Edmund and Fanny realise their love for each other. The stamp shows a hesitant Fanny Price at a door in Mansfield Park.

The second 77p stamp for the 1815 published work of *Emma* has Emma Woodhouse sitting in a carriage being addressed by Mr George

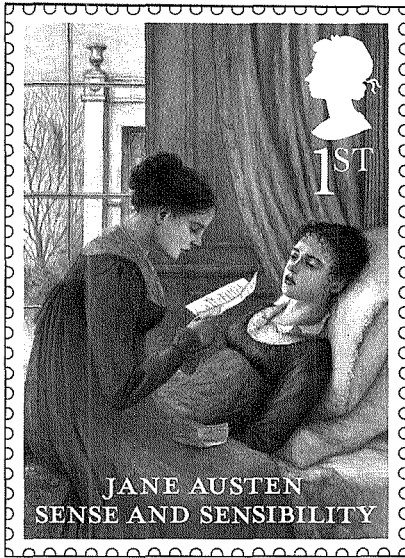


Fig.4 *Sense and Sensibility* on the 1st class stamp

Knightley. High-spirited and intelligent, with a conviction she is always right, Emma vows never to marry but enjoys matchmaking for others. She finally realises she has loved Mr Knightley all along, after there have been a series of romantic mishaps on the way.

The night-time candle lit scene on the first of the £1-28 stamps is set in *Northanger Abbey*, where the young Catherine Morland seeks to enter the mysterious suite of rooms no one now enters. The themes of the story are the conflict of marriage for love and marriage for property, as well as the loss of imagination, innocence and good faith. Catherine sees the best in people, but learns to accept that all is not as it initially seems in life. Her character grows through the book, and she becomes a real-life heroine, learning from her mistakes

in the outside world.

Finally, we have the stamp portraying Jane Austen's novel *Persuasion*, published in December 1817 after her death that year, but dated 1818. A widely appreciated love story that features a woman who seems destined for spinsterhood, having been persuaded by her family to break an engagement many years before as her suitor was a man of little status and no financial means. She re-encounters her lost love when she is 27 and he now a naval captain. It has been described as a second Cinderella story – a heroine generally unappreciated, exploited by others, who meets her handsome prince but initially loses out to others until all is resolved happily. She marries for love and leaves her less admirable connections behind.

Jane Austen never repeated herself and each of her books is distinguished from the others by important individual differences. All were the fruits of her past and drawn from her experience. These six works, admirably displayed by the British set of six stamps, show the perfected expression of her genius. Buy the stamps – and read the books!

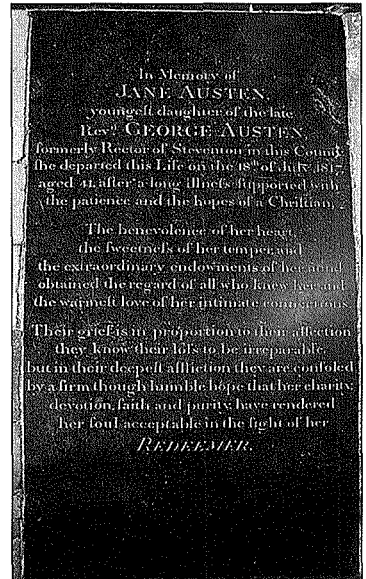


Fig.5 Memorial to Jane Austen