

Introduction: The Tarot of Jane Austen

The Jane Austen tarot card I am holding in my hand shows a series of small images—a young woman tending to children, fetching soup, performing domestic tasks.

Anne Elliot, in Persuasion, selflessly running her lazy sister's household? I guess. *But how does that answer my question?*

I know nothing about the tarot, and believe less, but I've played along anyway, following the tarot grand master's instructions to think of an open-ended question about my life and then draw a card from the deck. I am here in Philadelphia to attend the Jane Austen Society of North America's Annual General Meeting, and I have asked the cards to tell me whether I should write the book about Jane Austen fans that I've been mulling for months. *Could I do the project justice?* Now that the cosmos is supposedly giving me an answer, however, I can't figure out what it means. Typical.

This conference session on Jane Austen tarot cards is standing room only, despite the competition from the Regency ball in full swing next door, and I'm not the only audience member with a question about her card. I wait my turn to ask for help from the tarot grand master who created the Jane Austen deck--Diane Wilkes, a jolly woman with auburn hair falling past her shoulders. Yes, she confirms at last, my pictures do show Anne Elliot. The card illustrates the sentiment that Captain Wentworth, Anne's lost love and future husband, expresses halfway through the novel: "No one. . . so capable as Anne."

Despite my militant skepticism, the hairs on my neck prickle as the Jane Austen tarot cards yield an answer so perfectly suited to my question. And could it be coincidence that my middle name is Anne? Or that my literature-loving parents chose it from *Persuasion*? In spite of myself, I laugh.

“That’s pretty interesting, considering my question,” I tell Wilkes.

“I thought it would be,” she says.

The summer I was ten, I inserted a tiny key into the lock of my diary, turned to the gilt-edged page reserved for July 28, and wrote, “I woke up at 5:30 and read ‘Pride and Prejudice.’ We went to Central Park after breakfast, and I read some more.”

That bicentennial summer of 1976, we were visiting relatives in New York, at the end of a family vacation during which I’d spent every spare minute inhaling a suitcase’s worth of books. Next to the cot in my grandfather’s apartment, I had stacked a few last volumes, to tide me over the long days until the flight home to Colorado. My father was a college English professor and inveterate book-buyer, and it was he who had added *Pride and Prejudice* to my stack. History will record that this was my first Jane Austen novel. I was about to become a junior Janeite.

I was a bright, bespectacled child, with a head of wiry, unmanageable dark curls that refused to grow into the waist-length cascade I longed for. I lived in sleepy Colorado Springs, in an old white house with red shutters; my bedroom window framed the snow-capped top of Pikes Peak. Through sixth grade, I weathered the big, team-taught classes in the open-plan rooms of the neighborhood public school, where, one year, most of the girls had a crush on a teacher with groovy ‘70s sideburns named—yes, really--Mr. Darcy. Then my parents transferred me to a crunchy-granola private school, where camping in the mountains was part of the curriculum and we called all the teachers by their first names. As far back as I can remember, I earned good grades, hated gym class, and read with a ravenous hunger.

I was the ultimate literature nerd. Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, George Eliot, H.G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Mary Shelley, Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, Edith Wharton: throughout my tweens and teens, I mainlined classic fiction, finishing one thick novel only to start another, like a chain-smoker lighting her next cigarette from the embers of its predecessor. “I finished ‘Hard Times,’ began ‘The Last Chronicle of Barset,’ and went to the dentist,” ran a typical diary entry by my eleven-year-old self. A month later: “I have started a book called ‘Black and Blue Magic’ for school, because Katie recommended it. For pleasure I am reading ‘Can You Forgive Her?’ by Trollope.”

By fifth grade, I was spending every recess sitting cross-legged on the playground, engrossed in a book, while the other kids played Four Square. My teacher prohibited me from reading during the time set aside for wholesome physical activity, and, good girl that I was, I initially obeyed. But addicts have no morals. Soon, I was sneaking books outside under my coat and pursuing my disreputable habit in dark corners of the playground, one eye cocked for patrolling adults. I finished *A Tale of Two Cities* that way, curled up in a doorway during lunch period, weeping over Sydney Carton’s noble sacrifice.

My laconic diary entries and fragmentary memories provide few clues to what I loved in all these books, and I can’t remember when Jane Austen’s witty courtship novels emerged from the illustrious pack to become something special. Perhaps it was the winter’s day that, age eleven, I finished *Mansfield Park*, arguably Austen’s least accessible novel, and told my diary, “It is a wonderful book. I love Jane Austen.” Or perhaps it was the summer I was sixteen, when my parents and I visited Chawton cottage, the house in southern England where Austen wrote or revised all six of her novels and which is now a museum of her life. I spent hours wandering

through the quiet rooms, reading every caption, gazing at the household objects she might have touched, steeping in a magical sense of connection.

Back home that September, I persuaded a teacher at my high school to add *Emma* to the syllabus of her “Women in Literature” class. (I’m not sure how the other kids liked the book. One fellow student, unfamiliar with nineteenth-century language, read Austen’s account of Mr. Elton “making violent love” to the heroine and thought he was committing rape, not proposing marriage.) Sometime that fall, my parents bought me a membership in the three-year-old Jane Austen Society of North America, and a year later I took a weekend off during my first semester of college to attend JASNA’s fifth annual convention in nearby Philadelphia. I think I was the youngest participant—one woman told me I looked “charming” in the black velvet dress I wore to the banquet—but by then I had been reading Austen nearly half my life, and it was thrilling to meet two hundred other people who wanted to talk about her. Still, I felt mildly surprised when JASNA’s president rose to his feet at the conclusion of the conference and reminded us that our efforts to honor Austen were more for our benefit than hers—that, by now, she was so famous that she didn’t need us to keep her name alive. Jane Austen—famous? I wondered. Somehow, I had always thought of her as my own private possession.

That illusion was easier to maintain back when I first discovered Jane Austen. In July 1976, she had been dead for exactly 159 years, but she was not yet the global brand she would become. Nearly twenty years would have to go by before the advent of Austenmania’s Big Bang—the shot of a wet, white shirt clinging seductively to the chest of British actor Colin Firth, in the BBC’s 1995 production of *Pride and Prejudice*. Much as I loved the novels, back then I could not buy Jane Austen tote bags, mugs, board games, T-shirts, or bumper stickers, let alone the Jane Austen Action Figure (five inches of molded plastic, complete with quill pen). I could

not watch and re-watch movie versions of her books, or devour hordes of literary spinoffs and sequels, or log on to the Republic of Pemberley at midnight to post my analysis of a key passage in *Persuasion*. All that would come later, after the world had caught up to my obsession.

In the years after college, my Austen-love percolated just below the surface, as I launched a journalism career, moved to suburban New Jersey, and started a family. (My husband is British—he even read Austen in high school—but we met, not at a ball, but over cold toast in an Oxford college’s dining hall.) I rushed to all the Austen movies and tuned in to all the miniseries, and I reread the books whenever my life needed a bracing dose of Austen’s clarity and wit. When the JASNA conference came to Colorado Springs, I flew home, dropped my toddler son with his grandparents, and, with nary a backward glance, spent a joyful weekend absorbed in *Emma*.

A few years later, inspired by Karen Joy Fowler’s novel *The Jane Austen Book Club*, I roped five neighbors into reading the novels with me once a month, over tea and cake. We had a great time, and they liked the books, but—well, they didn’t like them quite the way I did. They didn’t seem to put themselves to sleep at night by composing dialogue for Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet to say during the *Pride and Prejudice* proposal scene that Austen sketches with characteristic indirection (“He expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do”). They showed no inclination to memorize the passionate love letter (“You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope”) that Captain Wentworth gives Anne Elliot in the climactic scene of *Persuasion*. They didn’t worry about whether Marianne Dashwood is really happy at the end of *Sense and Sensibility*. In other words, they weren’t nuts.

It was only a matter of time before I found my way to the Republic of Pemberley, the Internet's largest Jane Austen fan community. The first time I read Pemberley's epigraph ("Your haven in a world programmed to misunderstand obsession with things Austen"), I knew I was home.

In 1894, the British literary critic George Saintsbury coined a new term to describe Jane Austen's adoring fans, and ever since--sometimes affectionately, sometimes derisively--we've been called "Janeites." New Janeites are born all the time. Some, like me, fall in love young. One summer in the early 1990s, nearly a generation after I first cracked open *Pride and Prejudice*, a bookish teenager named Darrell Sampson finally gave in to his mother's urging and read the novel during a family road trip from Decatur, Illinois, to Washington D.C. The witty, self-assured Elizabeth Bennet captivated him; in his thirties, as a gay high school guidance counselor in northern Virginia, he joked to a local newspaper that, if his life were a book, its title would be *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict: My Eternal Search for Mr. Darcy*. He kept a Jane Austen Action Figure, still in its original packaging, on his desk at work and reread two or three of the novels every year. And the day he flew home to say goodbye to his dying mother, he took a copy of *Emma* to read as he sat by her hospital bed. "I knew it would be a comfort to me," he said, "but I also wonder if I grabbed it because I will always associate Austen with my mother, as she was the one who introduced the novels to me."

Other Janeites come to their obsession later in life. Around the time I was corralling my neighbors into reading Jane Austen with me, seventy-three-year-old Mary Previte was wrapping up a distinguished career that had taken her from running a juvenile detention center in the impoverished city of Camden, New Jersey, to serving four terms in the state legislature. Casting

around for something to do in retirement, she borrowed her daughter Alice's copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. Alice is still waiting to get her book back. Then Mary borrowed Alice's DVD of *Pride and Prejudice*, wet-shirt version. Alice never got the DVD back, either. In the years that followed, the two women traveled together to the Jane Austen Festival in Bath, England, where, in 2009, dressed in homemade gowns of purple Dupioni silk (Alice) and blue cotton velveteen (Mary), they helped the festival set a Guinness Book record for the largest gathering of people in Regency attire. (Austen's novels were published during the period known as the Regency, the nine years from 1811 to 1820 that the future George IV served as acting king, or regent, during his father's disabling illness.) When I visited the Prevites in late summer 2010, they were busy preparing for a return trip to Bath, shuffling through pictures of the previous year's festival, reminiscing about the friends they had made. Here, for example, was Edwin, from Holland.

"He had his boots handmade, because he couldn't find boots that he liked," Alice said.

Mary peered at the photo. "They look exactly like the ones that Darcy takes off when he jumps into the water," she said.

Alice had kept in touch with one woman from northern England who was sewing not only her own Regency gown but also outfits for her brother, her daughter, and her husband, a police officer.

A British cop who's into Jane Austen?

"Well, no," Alice said. "He's into *her*. *She's* into Jane Austen. He's into rescuing bats."

The Prevites' story points up the big difference between my journey and those of today's Janeites. Back when I was discovering Jane Austen, it wasn't so easy to find other fans.

Without Twitter accounts and online communities, Austen-obsession was more likely to remain a solitary pursuit, or one shared with, at most, a few relatives or close friends. Today, no junior

Janeite need curl up alone with her book in a darkened corner. She can start a blog, join the online Janeites discussion group, or hang out at the Republic of Pemberley. She won't feel isolated in her love, because, today, Jane Austen is everywhere. Sequels to Austen's six novels stack up in bookstores; filmed adaptations of her work fill the DVD racks; pithy, out-of-context quotations from her books adorn coffee mugs, T-shirts, and engagement calendars; and blogs, web communities, and Facebook pages devoted to her worship proliferate in cyberspace. One year, a small publisher struck it rich by adding zombie scenes to the text of *Pride and Prejudice*. The following summer, the Internet made a viral hit out of "Jane Austen's Fight Club," a short, hilarious video featuring women in Empire-line dresses doing needlework, practicing the piano, and slugging each other silly.

Austen's commercial potential is so compelling that even those who barely know her books fearlessly appropriate her long-out-of-copyright brand. In 2009, in upstate New York, classical singer Joanna Manring, who supported herself by teaching voice, was looking for ways to stay afloat in the midst of economic collapse. She decided to expand her group lessons by preparing teenage girls to perform the music of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Jane Austen Singing School for Young Ladies was born. During breaks in their rehearsals, the students drank tea and watched movie adaptations of Austen's novels; at their concerts, they performed wearing high-waisted gowns. Was Manring an Austen fan? "This is a secret: I have not read any Austen books," she admitted. "I do have a book of her complete works, so that is waiting for me. That is on my cosmic to-do list."

Of course, other artists have ardent admirers; other fan clubs run wild on the Internet; other subcultures have clubby conventions where grownups play dress-up. But, still, there's something about Jane. For, while hip college professors may lecture on *Star Trek* and edit

collections of essays on *The Big Lebowski*, no one confuses those works with artifacts of high culture. By contrast, nearly two centuries after her death, Jane Austen has a secure home in two very different worlds: the solemn pantheon of classic English literature and the exuberantly commercial realm of pop culture. She is the ultimate cross-over artist, equally welcome at Yale and on YouTube.

Welcome to the party, Janeites! Fandom loves company. After all, what could be more fun than spending an hour, or a weekend, with fellow devotees, hashing over the age-old question of whether Elizabeth Bennet is subconsciously attracted to Mr. Darcy even while claiming to dislike him? What a relief to be among people who know without being told who Tom Lefroy, Martha Lloyd, and Harris Bigg-Wither were! (Jane Austen's youthful crush, lifelong friend, and rejected suitor, respectively.) Who wants to love in solitude? Literature nerd can be a lonely way to spend an adolescence.

And yet. . .

Truth be told, I didn't mind my teenage isolation all that much. I cherished my solitary passions as marks of individuality, even of distinction. That tug of surprise I felt at my first JASNA convention, when I realized that Austen-love was hardly an esoteric taste, wasn't entirely pleasant. Part of me didn't want to share Jane Austen—or, at least, not with too many other people. And other Janeites seem to feel the same way. “To this day, Jane Austen will, most likely, remain an enigma,” wrote one participant in the online Janeites discussion list, “and, ironically, who is also imagined to be only-truly-known by each of us reading her.” This tension between the desire for community and the desire for exclusivity probably lies at the heart of any fandom, but, because of Austen's unique standing in both high culture and popular culture, that tension has a sharper edge among Janeites. It's not just the tension between privacy and

community, self and other; it's the tension between people who truly *understand* Jane Austen—people like me!—and those other, lesser fans who like her for all the wrong reasons, because of the movies, or the zombies.

Perhaps because Jane Austen is one of the most accessible of great writers—easy to read, easy to love--the drawing of such distinctions has a long history. Henry James sneered at sentimental, commercialized Austen-love as far back as 1905. “Are there any other writers who have seemed so vulnerable to being loved by so many in so wrongheaded a way?” the English-literature scholar Deidre Lynch wrote in 2000. Still, those tensions have come into clearer focus since a wave of Austen movies hit screens in the 1990s, propelling the globalization of Austen's brand. Once, calling yourself a Jane Austen fan seemed to signify a truly refined taste, the ability to appreciate biting irony and subtle characterization. Today, it's just as likely to signify a healthy lust for handsome Brits in tight breeches. Merely calling yourself a Janeite is no longer enough to mark your superior powers of discrimination. Now you have to spell out what kind of Janeite you are.

Although they are often caricatured as middle-aged, tea-drinking spinster librarians who knit sweaters and keep cats, Janeites are in some ways a rather diverse bunch. A 2008 survey of 4,500 Austen fans found an air traffic controller, a zoo keeper, and a Dominican friar among the ranks, as well as a fair number of teachers and, yes, librarians. The vast majority of survey respondents were female—though presumably not the Dominican friar—and most were also college-educated, with ages ranged across the spectrum. (Respondents weren't asked about their race or ethnicity, but at the JASNA events I've attended, most of the participants have been white.) Despite these commonalities of gender, educational attainment, and perhaps racial background, the survey results showed what any attendee at a JASNA conference already knew:

Janeites are college students and grandparents, evangelical Christians and secular feminists, academics who condescend to bonnet-wearing enthusiasts and unabashed swooners who love ogling Colin Firth in a wet shirt at least as much as they love rereading *Pride and Prejudice*.

What all these diverse enthusiasts share is a quality of engagement with Austen and her works that goes beyond mere admiration. For as long as Austen fans have been called Janeites, the word has signified more than a simple fondness for the six great novels. A Janeite is someone who feels an intensely personal affection for the writer and her books. Janeites love Austen's novels, but they also feel close to the author herself, whom they often call "Jane," as if she were a neighbor whose kitchen door they could knock on to borrow a cup of sugar.

Retired New Jersey legislator Mary Previte is a Janeite like that. She spent part of her childhood in a Japanese prison camp, lost a hand in a buzz-saw accident as a teenager, and faced down bureaucrats and lobbyists during her public service career, but, when we talked over green tea and zucchini bread, a Jane Austen biography lying open on the stack of books at her feet, what really got her angry were Austen's early experiences in the publishing world. "Every biography, when I get to that part"—the decibel level of Mary's clipped, emphatic voice began to rise above the ladylike—"that she can't get anyone to publish her books, and one publisher takes it, and it sits for, what, ten years, and she has to buy it back—I just want to *weep* with *rage* at the disrespect for such talent!" Separated from her husband in the 1970s, with a teenage daughter to support, Previte had gone back to work after years as a stay-at-home mother. She never remarried, and now, immersed in her late-life passion, she thought a lot about Austen's own life, as a single woman in a culture that made little provision for the support of women without husbands. "You sort of see some of your own issues in her life, playing out still," Mary said.

If the connection that fans feel with Jane Austen seems surprisingly intimate, given that she lived in an alien, barely industrial world and died before their great-grandparents were born—well, that’s nothing to the connection they feel with Jane Austen’s characters. At least Jane Austen was a real person. What to make of the sentiment, expressed by one participant in the online Janeites discussion list, that it was a shame Sir Thomas Bertram, the stern patriarch of *Mansfield Park*, couldn’t file a defamation suit against a filmmaker who portrayed him as a rapist? “Yes, I know he is a created character and not real,” she added. “All the more reason to leave him as he was created.” Another online discussion group was repeatedly convulsed by epic debates over the merits of the mousy heroine of *Mansfield Park*, battles so heated that they became known as “the Fanny Price wars.” And how to account for the animosity with which Alice Preville talks about some of Austen’s villains? “Aunt Norris just makes me nuts,” Alice said. “Lucy Steele—I want to scratch her eyes out.” The gold-digging, manipulative Lucy Steele of *Sense and Sensibility* belongs to a category that might be called Jane Austen’s Poisonous Bitches, female characters who lie, scheme, and bully their way through the genteelly vicious struggle over men, money, and social standing. No question she’s a piece of work, but still—scratch her eyes out? Janeites are rational people, perfectly capable of drawing firm lines between fiction and reality, and yet that distinction seems to melt into insignificance when they begin thinking about Jane Austen’s characters.

In Austen’s stories, Janeites find not just entertainment but an inexhaustible source of wisdom, comfort, and insight. Austen can be a support in adversity, to be read by a sick bed, or a moral beacon in a murky world. Laurie Michael, a Maine resident in her twenties who was homeschooled by evangelical Baptist parents, found in Austen’s novels a clear commitment to the values inculcated in her devoutly Christian upbringing, but sometimes neglected in twenty-

first-century life. “I appreciate a man who is a gentleman, and so Jane Austen’s heroes especially speak to me in that way,” Laurie said. “And then the heroines for their purity and modesty, as well as their wit and intelligence. They connect with things that I’m taught in the Bible, virtues that are to be cultivated.”

Me? I almost never refer to our author as “Jane”—like the characters in *The Jane Austen Book Club*, I find that “more intimate, surely, than Miss Austen would wish,” and perhaps a bit condescending, too, as if Austen deserves less deference than the male members of the literary pantheon. (Do we call Shakespeare and Dickens “Will” and “Chuck”?) I love the movies, but I think the books are always better. I don’t read with an eye to political or social history—I care very little about the Napoleonic Wars or the availability of sugar in the early nineteenth century—but I love the characters with an intensity reserved for few people in my real life. I would gladly talk all night about whether Anne Elliot or Captain Wentworth is more to blame for their eight-year estrangement. Come to think of it, I might scratch out Lucy Steele’s eyes myself.

But however much Janeites have always treasured her books, it’s really the wet shirt that morphed Austen from a much-loved classic into an international phenomenon. The BBC had produced previous adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, including a 1980 version with a screenplay by the feminist novelist Fay Weldon, but the new writer, Andrew Davies, set out to emphasize “sex and money and physicality, really, rather than all that buttoned-up-to-the-neck scene-setting,” he told a JASNA audience years later. “So I was looking for opportunities to get the characters out of their clothes, to be frank.” Midway through the story, Davies invented a scene-- unaccountably omitted by Austen herself--in which a hot, tired Darcy rides up to his palatial estate, Pemberley, sheds his constricting jacket and cravat, and dives into a convenient pond. Moments later, a fetchingly damp and disheveled Colin Firth strolled into Janeite history.

The show was a hit both in Britain, where it aired in the fall of 1995, and in the United States, where it aired on the A&E Network in January 1996. Visits to Austen's home at Chawton doubled, from 28,000 in 1995 to 57,000 the next year. Three other Jane Austen adaptations—a British TV film of *Persuasion*, starring Amanda Root; a feature film of *Sense and Sensibility*, starring Emma Thompson; and the movie *Clueless*, which updated *Emma* to high school in Beverly Hills—showed in American movie theaters around the same time, and, in the next year and a half, as two more versions of *Emma* arrived on the big and small screens, JASNA's membership grew by more than one-third, from 2,500 to 3,500.

Sociological explanations for the explosion of Janeite enthusiasm multiplied as quickly as journalists could write punny headlines (“Jane Addiction,” “Austen Powers”) or find new ways to finish a *Pride and Prejudice*-inspired lead sentence beginning, “It is a truth universally acknowledged.” Perhaps Austen represented a simpler, slower-paced era that appealed to a public exhausted by 24-7 bad news. Or perhaps women longed for romantic courtships conducted by chivalrous men who would fall in love without expecting so much as a kiss in return. Was it the elegance of Austen's language, or the sharp edge of her social satire, or her strong heroines, or her happy endings? Were the inhabitants of Britain's former colonies indulging their latent Anglophilia? Or did everyone just want an excuse to dress up in Empire waists and long gloves? Why Jane Austen?

Curiously, that's a question that may be harder to answer the more you love Jane Austen. Long before the wet-shirt days, Edith Lank heard a version of it every year. Edith had discovered Austen right after World War II, when she was teaching at a small college in Maine and decided to while away the cold New England winter by reading her way through the library, starting with the A's. In later years, she raised three children, worked in her husband's real

estate business, and wrote a syndicated real estate column and a series of real estate textbooks.

She collected Jane Austen translations in languages from Farsi to Icelandic, and, every year, after their annual visit to the JASNA conference, her husband would turn to her and ask, “So, what is it about Jane Austen?” Finally, she gave him the answer that Louis Armstrong had offered when asked to define jazz: “Man, when you got to ask what is it, you’ll never get to know.”

I read all those mid-‘90s articles about the Austen phenomenon, of course (what Janeite could resist a headline like “Jane Spotting”?), but I found all the pat explanations for her popularity deeply unconvincing, or perhaps just beside the point. Partly, it was that none of them seemed adequate to the size and diversity of the phenomenon. Austen is a great writer, but she’s not the *only* great writer. Nineteenth-century English literature is filled with vivid characters and exquisite prose, chaste courtships and long gloves, but no one is buying George Eliot tarot cards.

Mostly, though, it was that, like Edith Lank quoting Louis Armstrong, I found that none of the explanations seemed to capture the essential. If you asked why I love my husband, I could pile up complimentary adjectives--smart, funny, kind, supportive--but all those words would never account for the element of the unexplainable at the heart of any true love. I feel the same way when I’m asked why I love Jane Austen. If you’re not a Janeite, nothing could possibly explain this—the dressing up, the repeated viewings of the wet-shirt scene, the endless discussions of the doings of people who are *not real*. If you are a Janeite, it hardly needs explaining. What else could be as fascinating as this? The sociological interpretations may have merit, but they inevitably give us a bird’s-eye perspective on Austen-love, a view from the outside. We miss something essential about a consuming passion if we don’t look at it from the inside. Sociology can tell us a lot, but it can’t tell us what stories can, and every Janeite has a love story as distinctive as that of Elizabeth Bennet or Anne Elliot.

So, with the approval of the Jane Austen tarot cards, nearly thirty-five years after I first became a Janeite, I set out to examine Janeite obsessiveness from the inside, and maybe to figure out along the way what kind of Janeite I was myself. I didn't go looking for a single Big Theory that would make sense of Jane Austen's appeal; I wasn't planning to collect quantifiable data and fashion it into an explanation rigorous enough to satisfy a social scientist. My task was more impressionistic: to explore what Austen obsession looks like and feels like for people who are living with it, and perhaps to tease out some of the common threads that weave this diverse array of individuals into a community. I'd spent enough time immersed in online Austen discussions to know how differently her works could be read by people who all considered themselves Janeites. Were all of us just seeing what we wanted to see, finding ourselves reflected in an Austen-shaped mirror? Or did our divergent interpretations nevertheless reflect something real about Austen herself?

Although Austen-love is an international phenomenon by now—there are Jane Austen societies in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Japan, and the Netherlands, as well as in Britain—I focused on North American Janeites, the most numerous branch. I attended JASNA conferences with notebook in hand, interviewed Janeites from more than twenty U.S. states and two Canadian provinces, toured Austen sites in England with a group of fellow Americans, and trolled the Internet for Austen-related blogs. I met the people you'll find in these pages, among them a Canadian speech pathologist who thinks Austen wrote about autism, a Florida lawyer who is pursuing a byzantine theory about hidden subtexts in the novels, a Texan with a closetful of Regency gowns, an academic couple whose first conversation was an argument about *Mansfield Park*, and a writer of Jane Austen fan fiction who found her own Mr. Darcy while reimagining *Pride and Prejudice*. I read dozens of sequels, spinoffs, and updates of Austen's

stories, played a rather tedious Austenite video game, watched the Mormon movie version of *Pride and Prejudice* and the Tamil and Latina versions of *Sense and Sensibility*, and even scored a rare Jane Austen bobble-head doll.

And then there was *The Dress*.

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