The Economist

Fame and favourability

Jane Austen, 200 years on

How an unremarkable Englishwoman became a literary juggernaut

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SHE has small, unexceptional features and stares blankly into space. A lace bonnet keeps her dark curls in place, save for a few neat strands that frame her face. Behind her is a large country house and an illustration of Elizabeth Bennet, her most famous creation. This is the airbrushed image of Jane Austen on the new British £10 note which will be released on July 18th, the bicentenary of her death: just one example of how she has been reshaped and reimagined on her path to becoming a global literary sensation.

Austen was born on December 16th 1775, one of eight children. She briefly attended school, but this proved too expensive for her father. So she educated herself in his library instead, and spent her teenage years scribbling gleeful tales of female

drunkenness and violence. It is believed that she received a marriage proposal, yet chose the financially precarious option of remaining single, moving often. She completed six novels—two of which were published posthumously—but they brought little income. Austen died at 41, and was laid to rest in Winchester Cathedral.

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Though she had demonstrated shrewd business acumen by retaining the copyright of her later novels, Austen's family began recasting her as a modest lady who wrote for pleasure, not for profit. Cassandra, her sister, redacted or destroyed many of her letters. Austen's epitaph, written by her brother James, fails to mention her writing career, noting instead her "charity, devotion, faith and purity". Her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh, in what is considered the first full biography, stated that her "happy Christian life" was "singularly barren" of events.

How did this apparently unremarkable woman become one of Britain's best-known writers? At first it was because she was considered to have heralded a new type of novel: a realist form derived entirely from the quotidian. John Murray, a publisher, rejected stories like Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein", but chose to issue "Emma" in 1815 on the grounds that Austen's work featured "no dark passages; no secret chambers; no wind-howlings in long galleries; no drops of blood upon a rusty dagger". But her uniqueness lay in combining that realism with a new narrative style, one which moved deftly between the narrator's voice and the characters' innermost thoughts. This "free indirect speech" allowed the reader to see, think and feel exactly as the character did while also maintaining a critical distance and the ability to move between various points of view. It was radically inventive.

In the early 20th century the suffrage movement claimed her as one of its icons, marching with her name emblazoned upon its banners as proof of women's intellectual prowess. As Devoney Looser points out in a new book, "The Making of Jane Austen" (Johns Hopkins University Press), some activists reimagined her as a "demure rebel", arguing that she would have sniped from the sidelines. "We cannot picture Miss Austen addressing, far less interrupting, a public meeting," Bertha Brewster, a hunger-striking suffragette wrote, "but we can very well imagine her

making fun of Mr Arnold Ward's speeches." Evoking Austen not only bolstered the movement's point—she was admired across party lines and by both men and women—but also had the benefit of affirming Austen's particular gift. If women historically struggled to make their voices heard and their opinions known, Austen prevailed as a result of her undeniable skill. Readers on both sides of the debate turned to her books once more.

They did so again during the first and second world wars, as Kathryn Sutherland, a professor at Oxford University, has noted. Austen's novels were prescribed reading for shell-shocked soldiers who would not be reminded of their trauma by her gentle, seemingly insular narratives. In the dark days of the second world war Winston Churchill found it comforting to reread "Pride and Prejudice". Austen's novels were held up as offering sanctuary, a refuge from reality; in her pages readers could find a portrait of England before the fall.

But it was in the 1990s that Jane-mania reached new heights, thanks to a spate of television and film adaptations. Some—like "Metropolitan" (1990) and "Clueless" (1995)—found Austen's themes of status and wealth reflected in 20th-century America. Adaptations of "Pride and Prejudice" (pictured), "Sense and Sensibility", "Persuasion" and "Emma", all of which hit the screens between 1995 and 1996, were full-frills period pieces.

Screenwriters and directors usually chose to strip away the arch narrator—blunting much of Austen's power—and sex up the plot. Colin Firth's Mr Darcy emerging from a lake in a wet, white shirt, is nowhere to be found in Austen's writing. Audiences lapped these versions up. Andrew Davies's celebrated "Pride and Prejudice" series enjoyed more than 11m viewers in Britain every week. Nearly 4m people watched the first broadcast in America.

From Chawton to Chongqing

If Austen's work is perceived as quintessentially British, it has found resonance across the world. Bicentenary events are being hosted all over Europe. The Jane Austen Society of North America boasts more than 5,000 members; reading groups exist across Latin America.

The Jane Austen Society of Japan was established in 2006 and manga versions of "Pride and Prejudice", "Emma" and "Sense and Sensibility" were issued in 2015 and 2016. "Omangwa Pyungyeon", a 21-episode adaptation of "Pride and Prejudice" set in the South Korean justice system, had the highest ratings of its time slot when it

was broadcast in 2014-15. Many critics have pointed out the debt that the heroes of Korean drama owe to Mr Darcy.

In "The Genius of Jane Austen" (Harper; William Collins), Paula Byrne writes that Austen is seen as having a particular affinity with Chinese culture, where "manners matter" as they did in Georgian England. There have been more than 50 written versions of "Pride and Prejudice" in China alone. This may be because the term "marriage market" in China is more than a turn of phrase. In Shanghai, parents of unmarried children flock to a weekly event described as "match.com meets farmers' market" where they scout for prospective in-laws. Chinese women still seek to marry property-owning men more educated than themselves. Ms Byrne notes that Ang Lee, a Taiwanese director, was considered a perfect fit for "Sense and Sensibility" (1995) because his previous films had explored "family conflicts in the context of traditional Chinese values".

It is the subcontinent, however, that has embraced her books most enthusiastically, with Austen societies established in both India and Pakistan. The Pakistani group hosts inventively named sessions for "Jovial Janeites" such as "Austentatious tea parties" and "chai and chatter". Big-screen adaptations have fused Regency drama with Bollywood verve. "Bride and Prejudice" (2004), set in Amritsar, substituted Lalita Bakshi for Elizabeth Bennet and Indian weddings for country dances. "Kandukondain Kandukondain" (2000), a Tamil romance film, and "Kumkum Bhagya" (2014), an Indian soap opera, are both based on "Sense and Sensibility"; "Aisha" (2010) is an adaptation of "Emma" set amid Delhi's upper class.

The economic and social position of women, their reputation and eligibility are all themes that are easy to adapt to different cultural contexts, but there are specifics that resonate in Indian and Pakistani society, too, such as the importance of familial bonds, the preference given to male inheritance, the dowry system and the "marrying off" of young women by overzealous mothers and aunts. Laaleen Khan, the founder of the Pakistani branch, has noted that South Asian society has its share of "disapproving Lady Catherine de Bourgh-esque society aunties, rakish Wickhams and Willoughbys, pretentious Mrs Eltons and holier-than thou Mr Collins types".

This is the key to Austen's transformation from little known spinster-scribbler to literary superstar. Western readers may no longer empathise with the urgency that surrounds marriage or the idea that a relationship can be stopped in its tracks by

monetary circumstance. But everyone has encountered a flirty, shallow Isabella Thorpe or a suave but seedy Henry Crawford. Two hundred years on, Austen's sniping observations of human vanity and folly still hit the mark.

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