



*“Literary religions
are where you find
the real fanatics.”*

— Ernest Renan



A Tale of Austen Addiction

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Frontpiece: Flower textile design by William Kilburn. England, late 18th century. (V&A Images / Alamy)

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FIRST IMPRESSIONS

'they are all to move southward...'

Emma, vol. II, ch.18

It happened in Christchurch, New Zealand. Both my parents were South Islanders and in many Christmas holidays we packed up the car, with seven people and books for holiday reading, and set off for Wellington. There we stayed a night with friends, before taking the ferry crossing to the South Island next day. My poor mother only had to look at a boat to feel seasick (Admiral Croft's picture of a boat would have had her nauseous in seconds) so she sat very still, unable even to read, while Dad shepherded us around on board. Then it was off the boat, with car, to make the stunning drive down the Kaikoura Coast to Christchurch. We did the trip quite often when my father's parents were still alive and I cannot now be sure which holiday was the all-important one, but I think it was December 1973 / January 1974. I was thirteen. The house

*'delicious fruit—only
too rich to be eaten
much of—inferior to
cherries – currants
more refreshing—only
objection to gathering
strawberries the
stooping—glaring sun –
tired to death...'*

Emma, Vol. III, ch.6

next door to my grandparents, in the suburb of Ilam, was owned by a family named Frampton. They had relatives in Auckland so, in the days before it became fashionable to do so, we did a house swap. They took over our home up north; we settled for three weeks into their home down south. They had a tennis court which my siblings loved. We were taken raspberry-picking, where I soon came to know exactly why Mrs Elton complains about all that stooping and bright sun¹, and we swam at a beach

¹ Of course, in *Emma* it is strawberries, not raspberries, that are picked at Donwell Abbey.

called Taylor's Mistake where the rip was ferocious. I had to be rescued by a cute life-saver and stood feebly on the beach, with legs like jelly, when he brought me to shore. Taylor's mistake (whoever Taylor was?) was nearly Susannah's mistake too.

There were swims, picnics, tennis and all the usual fun of a summer holiday, but that particular holiday was memorable for one moment. "I think you might be ready for *Pride and Prejudice*", said my Mum one afternoon. She took out a well-loved book with a green cover, we went into the bedroom, and I assumed my comfy position on Mr and Mrs Frampton's rather lumpy old double bed. Mum began to read. "It is a truth universally acknowledged ...", smiling as she read those immortal words. Soon I was smiling too. In my book *Happily Ever After* I wrote an entire chapter about that brilliant opening line

'She only smiles, I
laugh'

Pride and Prejudice, vol. III, ch.18

– its ironies, its uses and abuses, its richness and genius. Familiarity has brought such admiration and love for that sentence I know by heart, but still I envy every reader who comes across it for the first time. They still have the whole 'first experience' just ahead of them. What joy that first reading of *Pride and Prejudice* brings. I can still see myself so clearly, lying there listening to the story of Elizabeth and Darcy. I can remember my frustrations with my mother, because she kept stopping to laugh. "Mum!" I protested, "just get on with the story!" "But it's so funny!" she argued, "I have to laugh!" Now I know exactly why and where she chuckled. Then I smiled at Jane Austen's words; now I laugh every time. *Pride and Prejudice* is not an especially long novel, far shorter than *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*. Soon, *far too soon*, we had finished.

One can only ever once have the thrill of a first reading of Jane Austen's most beloved novel. But re-readings are another matter – they can occur again and again and again. I was soon picking up the green book and dipping into it regularly – attending the ball where Darcy insults Elizabeth, witnessing Elizabeth getting the better of Lady Catherine in the wilderness,

delighting in the hilarious scenes between the married Bennets. Charles Darwin and his wife and children used Jane Austen's characters as a sort of shorthand to describe those they knew. Like Darwin, I found the characters rapidly become part of my mental and imaginative life – soon I could tell my mother that some bossy woman had a touch too much Lady Catherine in her, or that a teacher reminded me of Mr Collins, or that a flirtatious girl at school was a real Lydia Bennet. In turn, she would tell me someone reminded her of Mary Bennet, and we both knew exactly what sort of person that was. Each reading made the characters more familiar, and more loved. *Pride and Prejudice* was already changing me and the way in which I saw the world.

In *Mansfield Park* Fanny Price marvels over the human faculty of memory: “If any one faculty of our nature may be called more wonderful than the rest, I do think it is memory. There seems something more speakingly incomprehensible in the powers, the failures, the inequalities of memory, than in any other of our intelligences. The memory is sometimes so retentive, so serviceable, so obedient; at others, so bewildered and so weak; and at others again, so tyrannic, so beyond controul!” Fanny hits the nail on the head, and I can only impotently curse my tyrannical memory which refuses to allow me to remember what followed that memorable first reading of a Jane Austen novel. I cannot recall the order in which I then read the other novels. I cannot remember what years I first took them up, and in most cases I have no recollection of what I thought of them. It is horribly frustrating that my memory should be “so bewildered, so weak” in this particular instance. No other book in the world means as much to me, or has meant as much to me, as *Emma*, and yet my first reading of it is a total blank. I do recall my first reading of *Persuasion* which I loved, though even then I felt Anne was just a bit too good for me. She cannot be

‘You may perhaps like the heroine, as she is almost too good for me.’

Letter, 23 March, 1817

