Teach Me Speech – Jane Austen

*“The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid.”* That quotation is from Jane Austen’s novel, *Northanger Abbey*. Austen was a writer who lived from 1775 to 1817, and her novels are highly influential and widely read around the world.

Jane Austen was born in 1775, the seventh child of George and Cassandra Austen, a country priest and his wife. Only one of her siblings was also a girl, also called Cassandra, and Jane and Cassandra were best friends all their lives. As with most middle and upper class children in her time, Austen was primarily educated at home. According to the Jane Austen Society of North America, “Austen and her sister took part in the privileged life of the landed gentry, which is reflected in all her fiction,” which means that she was fairly rich, and her stories were about the fairly rich.

As a young woman, Austen wrote comic stories. Her first “mature” work was written when she was nineteen years old, and was a novella (short novel) called *Lady Susan*. In her early twenties, Austen wrote the novels that would become *Sense and Sensibility, and Pride and Prejudice* (they had other names when she first wrote them). Her father sent her manuscripts to publishers, and at first *Pride and Prejudice* was rejected, but they were later sold. When Austen was twenty-five, her father retired and the family moved to Bath, a seaside town in England. While there, Austen started working on a novel called *The Watsons*, but never finished it. After her father’s death, Jane’s some money together and moved Jane, her sister, and their mother to a cottage together, at which point Austen began the most productive period of her life. She published *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811, *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813, *Mansfield Park* in 1814, and *Emma* in 1815. That same year, she began writing a novel called *Persuasion*, and finished it before her death of (probably Addison’s Disease) in 1817. Interestingly, when her first novels were published, they didn’t have her NAME as an author, but simply said that the books were written by “A Lady.” After her death, though, they were re-released with her name. Her gravestone, which is visited by hundreds of people each year does not even mention that she was an author.

Jane Austen had a profound effect on fiction writing. “In contrast to other novels of her time, hers were about ordinary people, places, and events,” according to Professor Kathryn Sutherland. And John Mullan (a professor of English at University College London) wrote, in an article for *The Guardian*, that her novel *Emma was,”* revolutionary in its form and technique.” Her novels have also inspired countless movies, TV shows, and spinoff/fanfiction books.

My personal favorite Austen novel changes all the time. Sometimes it’s *Sense and Sensibility*, sometimes *Emma* or *Pride and Prejudice*, but what I really love about all of those stories is the humor in them. Yes, they’re about posh, bougey manners, but infused in all of them is a sense of how highly ridiculous all of those things are. Austen is gently, and very cunningly, making fun of the very manners and traditions her characters are obsessed with. I highly recommend reading any of her books, just make sure you appreciate the wit, and sly comedy of this great English author.