



200th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Austenland Revisited

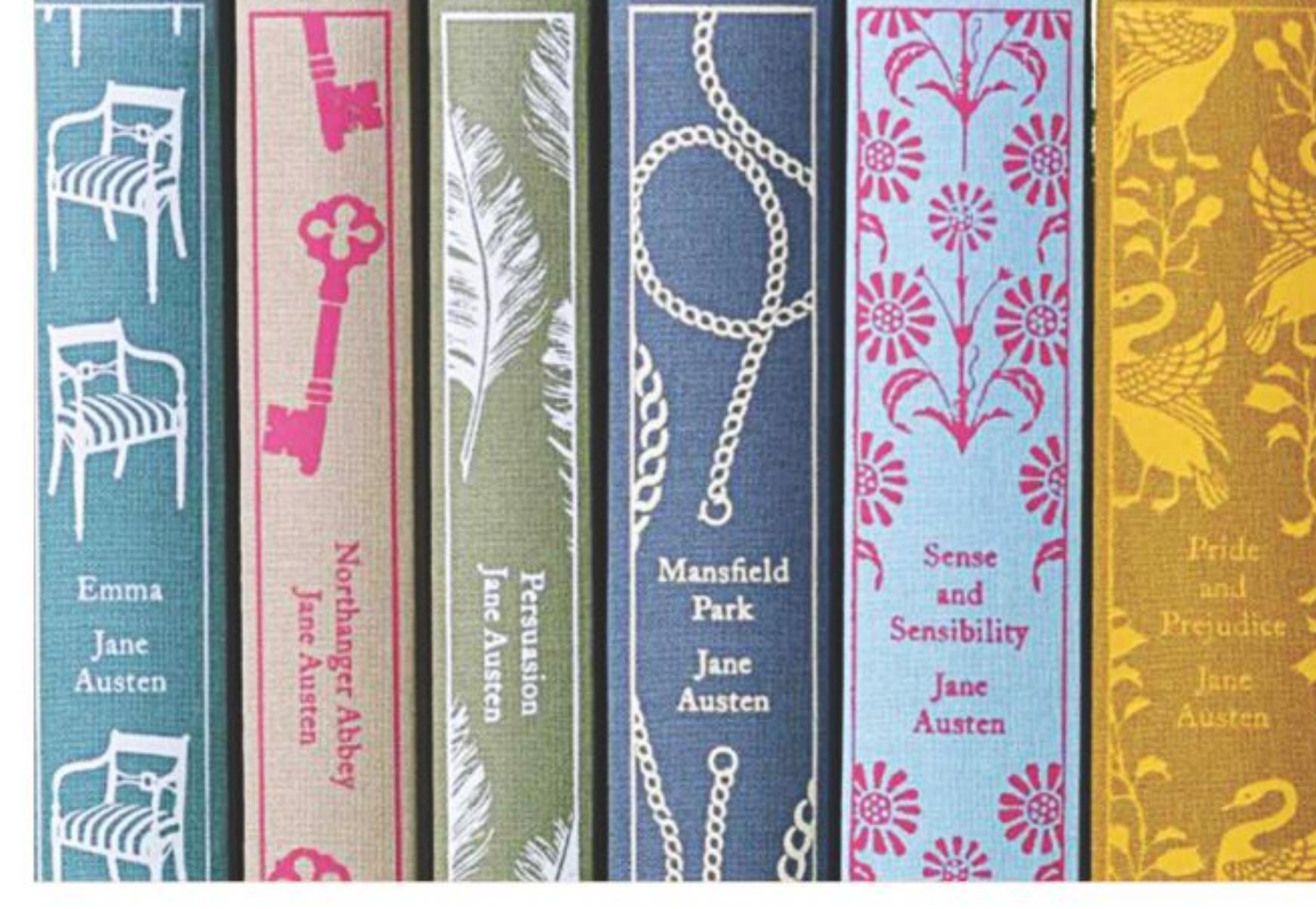
SHAFINA SHEHNAZ

I advance towards the bookshelf, a pleasurable hum of anticipation running through me – today is that most rare of opportunities: an evening to myself with Jane Austen. The windows in the sitting room are open to the cool breeze of early evening as I revel in the unexpected freedom: no office emails to tend, the kitchen clean and silent, the children abed, spouse abroad. My fingers dance across the shelf dedicated solely to Jane Austen, the paperbacks well-worn with loving readings and re-readings – what shall it be tonight? A laugh with and at the Bennets at Longbourn? Adventuring with Fanny Price at Mansfield Park? Or the just rewards of patient Anne in *Persuasion*?

The Austen books on the shelf are now old friends but I remember how I first came to read and love Austen. I was thirteen, in class eight at South Breeze school. An avid reader, I lived in perpetual need of more fodder and actively swapped books with other like-minded bookworms in class. A friend who was as addicted to books as I am brought me *Pride and Prejudice* one day – I can still see the hard-cover copy with a peach-dust jacket that showed a regency lady looking coyly into the distance. I expected a period romance novel, with a conventional heroine, a brooding hero and a gothic castle or some looming cliffs – but oh what a delightful surprise! A most unconventional heroine, a hero who gets over his brooding habits and the stately *mise en scène* of Pemberley turned my expectations upside down – it was the beginning of a life-long love of Austen.

I still remember the first giddy reading, the burgeoning delight as I re-read *Pride and Prejudice* again and realized – yes! it really was as good as I had thought! There were wonderful weeks where my friend and I spent the tiffin break discussing our favorite parts

of the novel, poring over plot-points – why does Jane go alone to London with the Gardiners, why is she not accompanied by Lizzie, who would have set Caroline Bingley straight! We loved, too, to imagine the delicious possibilities of life at Pemberley and how Elizabeth would have breathed energy into the old pile and lady-ed it over her arch-nemesis,



Lady Catherine De Burgh. And best of all, *Pride and Prejudice* was just the 'gateway drug' – I soon found other jewels of the Austen canon in the dusty bookshops at New Market and Nilkhet and set about getting better acquainted with my new friends.

Twenty-five years later Jane Austen is still an active part of my reading life. How I read her work has subtly changed through the years, alongside the changes in my own life. In my early twenties, observing the matchmaking in Dhaka's marriage mart, Mrs. Bennet suddenly seemed all too real, her comical

obsession with marrying off her daughters not dissimilar to society matrons I knew. I had more insight into Fanny Price too, and the pressure on a young woman to accept a wealthy suitor and lift her family's fortunes. In my thirties, I appreciated anew Anne Elliot, seeing her faithfulness and deep love for Captain Wentworth from the prism of

Austen's epistolary novel *Lady Susan*, and two films inspired by *Pride and Prejudice*, *Bridget Jones's Baby* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (really, Austen and zombies? zombies!). Altogether, the three films have grossed over \$250 million worldwide. And before you ask – yes I proudly saw them all at the theatre, some maybe more than once.

As I reflect on my lifelong relationship with Austen, I realize that over the years reading the author has influenced my reading habits and how I think about the world. It has set a standard by which I measure the pleasures of reading – Austen's wit, keen social eye, the beauty of a deftly turned phrase, the deep humanity of her characters – are all elements I have learned to savor and seek in a favorite book. Her heroines too embody and reinforce the virtues of my Bengali upbringing: modesty, honesty, an appreciation for music, art and literature, a principled choice to live morally despite the temptations of ease and wealth. While my day-to-day life is far from that of a Catherine or Emma or Elinor, like any lover of Austen, I like to think myself as a potentially worthy Austen heroine – after all are we not all the heroines of our own life-stories? I'd like to think Jane Austen, beloved author, would approve.

In the meantime, tonight my fingers stop on *Persuasion* and I pull the book from my bookshelf – tonight I will spend time with Anne Elliott. Like a cool, refreshing draught of water I cannot wait to taste Austen again; a familiar but infinitely renewing pleasure awaits.

Shafina grew up in Dhaka loving books, chotpoti and stray animals but now lives in Brooklyn with her husband, two children and some cats. Currently, she works in finance.

Romancing a Royal Favour: The Dedication Page of *Emma*

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Of the six novels written by Jane Austen, *Emma* is the only one to include a dedication page. It reads, "To His Royal Highness, The Prince Regent, This work is, By His Royal Highness' Permission, Most Respectfully Dedicated, By His Royal Highness's Dutiful and Obedient Humble Servant, The Author." It is indeed remarkable for a novel, which does not even bear the author's name, to feature the insignia of the Prince Regent on its spine as well as a formal dedication to the future King of England. As a Tory sympathizer, Austen was not a fan of the regency, which relied heavily on a parliament controlled by the Whigs. On several occasions, Austen disclosed her dislike for the frivolous and flamboyant Prince Regent. The humble tone and regal manner of the dedication therefore is confusing—to say the least!

The "disreputable and somewhat ludicrous" Prince Regent was far from popular in his time. He came to power after his father, the mentally delusional King George III, was declared unfit by the Parliament. The Prince's reckless behavior in both private and public spheres made him an undeserving candidate for this new role. Soon after coming to the throne, he tried to get a formal divorce by scandalizing his wife. The Prince launched a "delicate investigation" to pry into his wife's alleged secret love life. The Prince earlier was forced by his advisory council to marry Caroline of Brunswick to settle his financial debts. As Prince Regent, he announced his wife "unfit" and unworthy of receiving visits from their daughters. In response, Princess Caroline wrote a passionate letter to her husband, which her Whig supporters later published in *The Morning Chronicles*.

Austen reacted to the news in a letter written to her friend Martha Lloyd in February 1813. She wrote:

I suppose all the World is sitting in judgment upon the Princess of Wales's Letter. Poor woman, I shall support her as long as I can, because she is a Woman, & because I hate her Husband – but I can hardly forgive her for calling herself 'attached & affectionate' to a Man whom she must detest ... I do not know what to do about it; but if I must give up the Princess, I am resolved at least always to think that she would have been respectable, if the Prince had behaved

only tolerably by her at first. ("Letter 82")

Austen here champions sisterhood in framing her sympathy for Princess Caroline. She is at the same time reflecting on the idea of ultimate male responsibility for female behavior, an idea that is central to Austen's 1813 novel, *Pride and Prejudice* where Darcy is the idealized gentleman who identifies and controls feminine impropriety. Similarly the protagonist Emma in the novel is constantly disciplined by her future husband George Knightley. Emma manages to emancipate herself at least in her imagination and refuses to submit to any authoritarian figure. The same can be said of her creator, Jane Austen—a fact

TO
HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS
THE PRINCE REGENT,
THIS WORK IS,
BY HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS'S PERMISSION,
MOST RESPECTFULLY
DEDICATED,
BY HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS'S
DUTIFUL
AND OBEDIENT
HUMBLE SERVANT,
THE AUTHOR.

that only adds to the dedication dilemma.

Austen was in the middle of writing *Emma* in June 1814 (the novel was composed in fourteen months, from January 21, 1814 to March 29, 1815), when the Prince Regent offered a huge banquet for several heads of states to commemorate a victory in battle over Napoleon. The celebration was followed by an extravagant parade to which Austen responded, "I long to know what this bow of the Prince will produce." It is strange that Austen decides to dedicate her book to someone whom she detests. The background of the dedication therefore merits detailing.

In October 1815, Austen came to London to take care of her brother Henry who was ill. At the same time, she was negotiating her fees with her 'civil-rogue' publisher John Murray ("Letter 121"). Henry's doctor Charles Haden was an acquaintance of Prince Regent's physician. The news that the author of *Pride and Prejudice* was in town reached the Prince who in turn asked his librarian Rev. James Stanier Clarke to arrange for Austen a guided tour of his Carlton House library.

During the tour Clarke told Austen that "The Regent has read and admired all [her] publications" and the Prince Regent even had a set of all her books in all of his residences. He added, "Lord St. Helens and many of the Nobility who have been staying here, paid you the just tribute of their Praise" ("Letter 138A"). At one point of the tour, Clarke suggested that Austen could consider dedicating one of her future books to the Prince Regent. Austen was a bit surprised by the proposition. She later wrote to Clarke, asking whether it was 'incumbent' upon her "to shew my sense of the Honour, by inscribing the Work now in the Press, to HRH" ("Letter 125 D"). Clarke replied,

"It is certainly not incumbent on you to dedicate your work now in the Press to His Royal Highness; but if you wish to do the Regent that honor either now or at any future period, I am happy to send you that permission" ("Letter 125 A").

A confused Austen discussed the matter with her sister Cassandra, brother Henry and publisher Murray. The correspondence is evident in her letter written to Cassandra: "I did mention the PR in my note to Mr. Murray, it brought me a fine compliment in return; whether it has done any other good I do not know, but Henry thought it worth trying" ("Letter 128"). She probably thought of the PR (Prince Regent) insignia as nothing more than a PR campaign. Austen thus went ahead with the suggestion, and asked her publisher to make specially bound copies for the Prince Regent. Accordingly, Murray made presentation copies in scarlet with the Prince of Wales's feathers on the spine of the volumes and, as instructed, sent them to Clarke three days before the book was publicly available.

As it appears in the first edition, the dedication page seems like a last minute insertion. It is placed before the front

leaf where normally the half-title page appears. Because of this late adjustment, the half-title page is found at the back leaf of the first volume. Austen requested Murray to include the dedication on Monday December 11, 1815, even though the book was advertised to be published in the coming Saturday ("Letter 130"). Her ignorance of, if not indifference to, royal protocol is apparent in her instructions: "The Title page must be, *Emma*, Dedicated by Permission to H.R.H. The Prince Regent". Fortunately for Austen, Murray saved her from a potential protocol blunder by rewriting the title page as mentioned above. Austen was quick to thank her publisher for 'putting her right', adding: "Any deviation from what is usually done in such cases is the last thing I should wish for" ("Letter 131").

The royal librarian graciously acknowledged receipt of the "handsome copies" of the novel on December 21, stating that the copies had "gone to the Prince" ("Letter 132 A"). He went on to request Austen to write another book on the House of Saxe Cobourg from the perspective of a clergyman with a dedication for his new master, the Prince's new son-in-law Prince Leopold. Austen made light of the situation, saying that she would keep to her own style as she had no plan of writing a historical romance, and stalled the possibility of any further royal dedication. Austen continued to maintain a lukewarm correspondence with Clarke. When Clarke informed Austen of his promotion in the household of Prince Leopold, she curtly replied: "The service of a court can hardly be too well paid, for immense must be the sacrifice of Time & Feeling required by it" ("Letter 138A" 311).

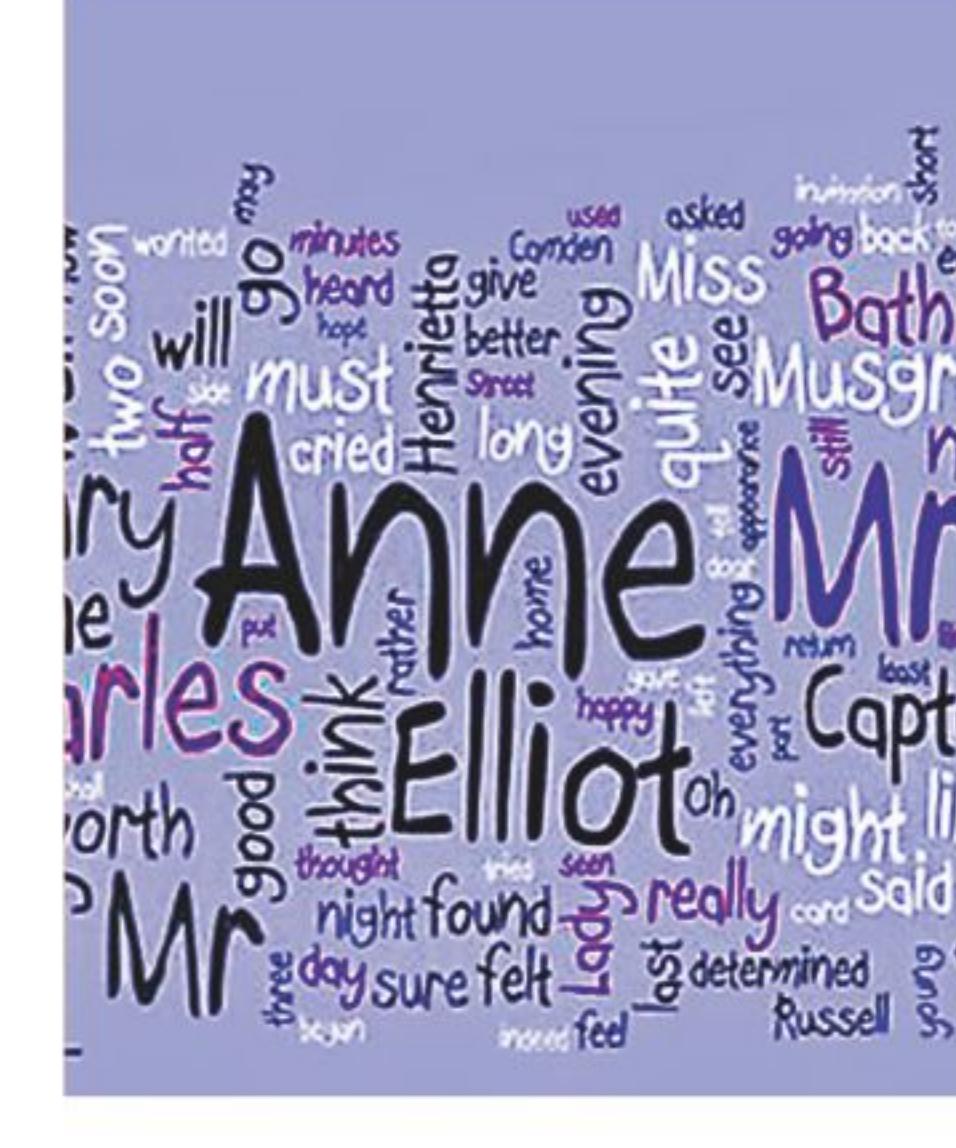
Austen's characteristic irony makes it difficult to ascertain whether this comment is actually meant as a compliment on Clarke's success or on her own failure to gain anything out of the courtly service rendered to the Prince. After all, the time and feeling employed by Austen in including the dedication earned her nothing but a "fine compliment."

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Becoming a JANEITE

T.S. MARIN



I cannot exactly pinpoint the first time I read Austen. Back in high school? Or in one of my earlier semester breaks as an undergrad? But it was love at first sight, I mean first page! Come to think of it, how can a reader not love her words? Love, drama, comedy, morality, lawns, tea-parties, manors, gowns, ball dances, long walks, love letters—not to mention the happily ever afters. Reading Austen novels is very much like watching a Disney movie, they are all "sugar and spice and everything nice"!

However, my first "official" encounter with Austen was in Spring 2010 in a 19th Century Novels course at East West University. On a chilly early morning our witty instructor began his class thus: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Were we supposed to laugh or ponder over the socio-economical gravity of women in England in the late eighteenth century or its striking resemblance to our country at this time? I chose the easy way out and suppressed a giggle. Later in the class, sir explained how an opening line can sometimes become better known than the book and/or author. I would not say something so daring, but poor Mr Darcy—his fate was "doomed" from the opening sentence! Once we were halfway through the text of *Pride and Prejudice*, sir arranged a screening of the 2005 film version. I confess I was not overjoyed with Keira Knightley's version of Miss Lizzy in it, but I daresay I never liked one of the most beloved heroines of English literature a.k.a. Elizabeth Bennet very much either! While I appreciated her sassiness very very much then as now, I can't help noticing her all feminist agenda going down the drain at the first sight of Pemberley.

But that is precisely why I adore Jane Austen so much! Who else could have made characters so real and human? Austen's works provided me with different kinds of "fairytales" at this stage of my life. They enabled me to see that courage and determination are better problem-solvers than a magic lamp or a witch's shady concoction, happily ever afters really do exist, and, big old mansions are almost as magical as glass slippers!

But what I love most about Austen's novels is that their author knew with hairsplitting accuracy how a woman might think or speak or act in a given circumstance. While reading her, I feel that she herself was Emma, or Elizabeth, or Catherine, or even Jane (Bennet). These ladies were not made in the same mould; but it does seem to me that Austen manifested different facets of herself in each of her heroines. Often lauded as one of the first and finest feminist authors, Jane Austen is immensely and enduringly popular among female readers everywhere—feminist or not. But can the same thing be said about all male readers? Finding a male Janeite, I am sure, is almost as difficult as finding a leprechaun. And yet some of the most macho men I have ever known are Janeites; and in my not-so-small already-read list, I have seldom come across a man as gallant as Mr Darcy!

I have this habit of reading books echoing the season and/or weather. Accordingly, last winter I decided to read *Northanger Abbey* for the first time. Published posthumously, it is believed to be her first completed novel. My interest in this book, apart from the obvious fact that it was written by dear old Jane, was because of my irrevocable love for gothic romances. I already knew *Abbey* was actually a parody of such books, and deep down I was shopping for some *Wuthering Heights*-esque horrors! Was I disappointed? Yes! Did I dislike the book? No. And there lies the brilliance of Austen—she never lets her readers down! Fun fact: despite mocking the lurid potboilers and penny dreadfuls throughout the book, Austen once admitted in a letter that reading such books are one of her guilty pleasures.

I have saved my favorite *Emma* to end my piece—as we save our favourite piece of dessert for the end! Of all her novels, I find *Emma* to be the most dramatic, so full it is of matchmaking and heartbreak and dances and all! No wonder from Hollywood to Bollywood, there have been numerous adaptations of this novel; and between you and me, I did enjoy watching pretty much all of them. I love this book so very much because among all of Austen's heroines, I connect with dear Miss Woodhouse the most.

Surely in a previous life, I had been born in 19th century England. Well, blame Miss Austen (as well as the Miss Brontës) for that! Between a star-eyed fan girl of Jane and a high-brow Janeite, I believe I am still stuck somewhere in between. While the flawless techniques and subtle feminism in her novels awe the academic in me, readerly me cannot help getting lost in those quaint little towns, the long walks, the tea-parties and dances, the happily ever afters.... Speaking of which, I would like to end this "musing" piece with an anecdote. A couple of weeks back, I searched every renowned bookstore of Dhaka for one particular edition of *Emma* but failed miserably. My very own Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy got whiff of it, and I found the book with the sweetest of notes. Gentlemen are not extinct, really!

Dear Jane, happy birthday and thank you for all the happy endings—whether fictional or real.

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