

The  
Jane Austen  
Writers' Club

Inspiration and Advice  
from the World's  
Best-Loved Novelist

R E B E C C A   S M I T H

Illustrations by Sarah J Coleman

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## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



I have been following Jane Austen around for a long time. Like so many people I was introduced to her work at school – *Pride and Prejudice* when I was fourteen, the perfect age. The school was in Dorking, or ‘the Town of D—’ as Jane Austen puts it in *The Watsons*. It was a short walk from Box Hill, site of the disastrous picnic in *Emma*. I didn’t notice any Mr Darcys or Mr Knightleys in Form 4A, but there were plenty of aspiring heroines like Catherine Morland. *Pride and Prejudice* was one of the first novels for adults that I fell in love with. It transported me from a world of boys who tortured wasps to Pemberley. I remember reading it in the garden of our house, which



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was in Reigate, not Dorking, in the company of a neighbour's disreputable frog-killing ginger tom. I called him Ginger Wickham.

I am Jane Austen's five-times-great-niece. It is a nice thing to be but no claim to fame. Jane Austen's brothers had thirty-three children between them, so two hundred years on there must be thousands of Austen descendants. But when I visited my great-aunt in Winchester I loved looking at some little portraits of Jane Austen's sailor brothers, Francis (my ancestor) and Charles, and what turned out to be a rare depiction of her father, the Reverend George Austen. These portraits are now on display at Jane Austen's House Museum in Chawton, Hampshire so I can visit them there.

I went to university in Southampton and still live in the city and teach creative writing at the university. There are still traces of the Southampton Jane Austen knew when it was her home before she finally settled at Chawton. The sea has been pushed back from where it once came up to the city walls so that she could see it from the garden she created with Francis's family, her sister Cassandra and her mother. She liked the city – there was and is much more to it than the stinking fish mentioned in *Love and Freindship*.

From 2009 to 2010 I had the immense good fortune to be the writer-in-residence at Jane Austen's House Museum. I reread all Jane's works and her letters and had a wonderful year with the staff and volunteers, talking to visitors, running writing workshops, visiting schools, generally getting lost in Austen and working on my fifth novel. On Jane Austen's 234th birthday, 16 December





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2009, I was one of the first in the house. I remember going to open the shutters in Jane's bedroom and desperately hoping that I'd catch a glimpse of her. I didn't, but this book had its genesis during that year. Spending so much time where Jane Austen lived, where she wrote *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion* and revised her three earlier novels, walking where she did and seeing the views from her windows was magical and inspiring. The museum isn't haunted, but many of the staff, volunteers and visitors testify to its healing atmosphere. I have now run many writing workshops at Jane Austen's House Museum and elsewhere, using Jane's work and methods to inspire writers working in all genres. I'm so grateful to the museum for the opportunities it has given me and to the writers who have come to the workshops, sharing their writing, ideas and experiences.

I thought of those writers as I worked on this book. I hope it will be useful to them and to writers around the world who love Jane Austen or are less familiar with her work, and to readers, teachers and Janeites everywhere.

I hope this book will help you, whether you are writing a novel, concentrating on short stories or working in another form. People love Jane Austen's work for so many reasons – the comedy, her sparkling dialogue, the unforgettable characters, the accuracy of her observations, her neat and satisfying plots, her use of language, the way she writes relationships, and how she captures what it is to be in love, lonely, bullied, wrong, disappointed, to be part of a family . . . The list goes on and on. Her letters give us wonderful insights into her life, and in them she gives advice on writing; I have included that too.



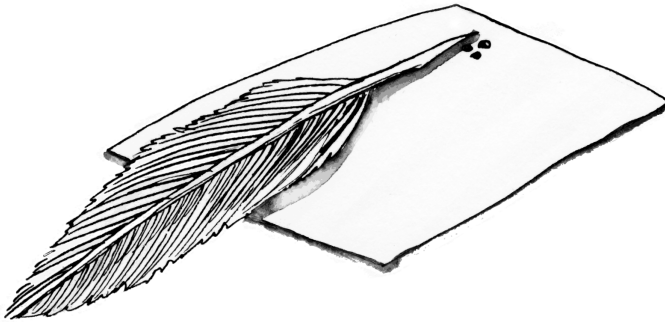
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One of the most difficult aspects of writing this book was deciding which extracts to use and then having to limit their length. I hope you find the advice and exercises useful. I'm sure that the quotations will send you back to Jane Austen's novels and letters themselves. There is no better place to go.

Rebecca Smith  
Spring 2016

# Plan of a novel

*Planning, plotting and getting started*



**T**HIS CHAPTER IS ABOUT planning a novel and the things you can do to set out in the right direction and stay on track. You can't plan everything. Unless you are doing something truly formulaic, such as writing as an anonymous jobbing author for a series, you should leave room to surprise yourself, for creativity and for those moments of alchemy and inspiration which have the power to lift and transform your work.

It's probably easier to suggest how *not* to write a novel. Jane Austen knew exactly what she *didn't* want to write. Her *Plan of a Novel according to hints from various quarters* dates from 1816, when she was corresponding with James Stanier Clarke, the Prince Regent's chaplain and librarian at Carlton House. He was clearly rather taken with her but couldn't resist making lots of 'helpful' suggestions for her work. Perhaps he hoped to make himself indispensable to her. Dream on, Mr Stanier Clarke. Her letters to Mr Clarke and her *Plan of a Novel* show us what she definitely *wouldn't* do. She included in the margins the names of people whose hints she was not going to take. His name was there.

Incidentally, one of the most likely but unauthenticated portraits of Jane Austen is a watercolour by James Stanier Clarke preserved in his *Friendship Book*. This lovely portrait of an elegant woman is very likely Jane. She had been 'invited' to dedicate her next novel (*Emma*) to the Prince Regent, who was a fan. She wasn't a fan of his but had no choice but to comply.

Here is Jane's *Plan of a Novel*.<sup>1</sup>

SCENE to be in the Country, Heroine the Daughter of a Clergyman, one who after having lived much in the World had retired from it and settled in a Curacy with a very small fortune of his own. – He, the most excellent Man that can be imagined, perfect in Character, Temper, and Manners – without the smallest drawback or peculiarity to prevent his being the most delightful companion to his Daughter from one



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year's end to the other. – Heroine a faultless Character herself, – perfectly good, with much tenderness and sentiment, and not the least Wit – very highly accomplished, understanding modern Languages and (generally speaking) everything that the most accomplished young Women learn, but particularly excelling in Music – her favourite pursuit – and playing equally well on the PianoForte and Harp – and singing in the first stile. Her Person quite beautiful – dark eyes and plump cheeks. – Book to open with the description of Father and Daughter – who are to converse in long speeches, elegant Language – and a tone of high serious sentiment. – The Father to be induced, at his Daughter's earnest request, to relate to her the past events of his Life. This Narrative will reach through the greatest part of the first volume – as besides all the circumstances of his attachment to her Mother and their Marriage, it will comprehend his going to sea as Chaplain to a distinguished naval character about the Court, his going afterwards to Court himself, which introduced him to a great variety of Characters and involved him in many interesting situations, concluding with his opinions on the Benefits to result from Tithes being done away, and his having buried his own Mother (Heroine's lamented Grandmother) in consequence of the High Priest of the Parish in which she died refusing to pay her Remains the respect due to them. The Father to be of a very literary turn, an Enthusiast in Literature, nobody's Enemy but his own – at the same time most zealous in discharge of his Pastoral Duties, the model of an exemplary Parish



Priest. – The heroine's friendship to be sought after by a young woman in the same Neighbourhood, of Talents and Shrewdness, with light eyes and a fair skin, but having a considerable degree of Wit, Heroine shall shrink from the acquaintance.

From this outset, the Story will proceed, and contain a striking variety of adventures. Heroine and her Father never above a fortnight together in one place, *he* being driven from his Curacy by the vile arts of some totally unprincipled and heart-less young Man, desperately in love with the Heroine, and pursuing her with unrelenting passion. – No sooner settled in one Country of Europe than they are necessitated to quit it and retire to another – always making new acquaintance, and always obliged to leave them. – This will of course exhibit a wide variety of Characters – but there will be no mixture; the scene will be for ever shifting from one Set of People to another – but All the Good will be unexceptionable in every respect – and there will be no foibles or weaknesses but with the Wicked, who will be completely depraved and infamous, hardly a resemblance of humanity left in them. – Early in her career, in the progress of her first removals, Heroine must meet with the Hero – all perfection of course – and only prevented from paying his addresses to her by some excess of refinement. – Wherever she goes, somebody falls in love with her, and she receives repeated offers of Marriage – which she refers wholly to her Father, exceedingly angry that *he* should not be first applied to. – Often carried away by the anti-hero, but rescued either by her Father or by the Hero – often reduced to support herself and her

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Father by her Talents and work for her Bread; continually cheated and defrauded of her hire, worn down to a Skeleton, and now and then starved to death. – At last, hunted out of civilized Society, denied the poor Shelter of the humblest Cottage, they are compelled to retreat into Kamschatka<sup>2</sup> where the poor Father, quite worn down, finding his end approaching, throws himself on the Ground, and after 4 or 5 hours of tender advice and parental Admonition to his miserable Child, expires in a fine burst of Literary Enthusiasm, intermingled with Invectives against holders of Tithes. – Heroine inconsolable for some time – but afterwards crawls back towards her former Country – having at least 20 narrow escapes from falling into the hands of the Anti-hero – and at last in the very nick of time, turning a corner to avoid him, runs into the arms of the Hero himself, who having just shaken off the scruples which fetter'd him before, was at the very moment setting off in pursuit of her. – The Tenderest and completest Eclaircissement takes place, and they are happily united. – Throughout the whole work, Heroine to be in the most elegant Society and living in high style. The name of the work *not* to be *Emma*, but of the same sort as *S. & S.* and *P. & P.*

So, drawn from that, here are some of Jane Austen's tips on how not to write a novel.

1. Have leading characters who are perfect in every way.
2. Make sure that your villains are evil through and through.

3. Open with a long description of the characters and have them converse in long and implausibly elegant speeches. (Make all your dialogue like that.)
4. Continue with a huge wodge of backstory. This should take about a third of the book before the actual story starts.
5. Keep your story jumping about in seemingly random directions.
6. Keep introducing new sets of characters whom you then forget about in the next scene.
7. Keep up a series of implausible events.
8. Make sure that any really important scene is bogged down with boring irrelevancies.
9. Make sure that your plot is full of inconsistencies. It doesn't much matter what happens or how things are connected as long as you just keep going for a really, really long time.
10. The ending should be completely predictable but nevertheless precipitated by a coincidence or by something that has developed without the reader having any knowledge of it.

These mistakes might seem obvious, but agents see aspiring writers fall into such tar pits again and again. Jane Austen gently pointed out some of these things to her niece, Anna Austen – later Anna Lefroy, the eldest daughter of her brother James – for instance telling her,



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'Your Aunt C. does not like desultory novels, and is rather afraid yours will be too much so, that there will be too frequently a change from one set of people to another, and that circumstances will be introduced of apparent consequence which will lead to nothing. It will not be so great an objection to *me* if it does. I allow much more latitude than she does, and think nature and spirit cover many sins of a wandering story.'<sup>3</sup>

I suspect that Jane shared Cassandra's reservations but wanted to be tactful, giving many more detailed criticisms and suggestions in this and other letters. Jane and her mother and sister read Anna's work and returned it with comments and suggested cuts. Anna clearly had potential. Although her novel, *Which One Is the Heroine?* or *Enthusiasm*, was never published, and the manuscript doesn't seem to have survived, we can discern quite a lot about it from Jane's letters. Jane Austen gave advice to Anna's younger siblings, Caroline and James Edward, who were also aspiring writers. She was a patient aunt and helpful critic. Here are some of the key things Jane advised apprentice writers to do.

*Read*

We know that Jane Austen was a voracious and omnivorous reader, not just from the evidence of her novels but from her letters and the records we have of her family's collections of books. She was a member of the Chawton Book Society (in the way that so many people are members of book clubs today) and a dedicated library user. The members of the Chawton Book Society clubbed together to buy and share books.

And, when Jane Austen was only weeks away from death, she wrote to her niece Caroline to stress that if she wanted to be a writer, she had to be a reader. Caroline recalled this in her reminiscences.

As I grew older, my aunt would talk to me more seriously of my reading and my amusements. I had taken early to writing verses and stories, and I am sorry to think how I troubled her with reading them. She was very kind about it, and always had some praise to bestow, but at last she warned me against spending too much time upon them. She said – how well I recollect it! – that she knew writing stories was a great amusement, and – she thought – a harmless one, though many people, she was aware, thought otherwise; but that at my age it would be bad for me to be much taken up with my own compositions. Later still – it was after she had gone to Winchester – she sent me a message to this effect, that if I would take her advice I should cease writing till I was sixteen; that she had herself often wished she had read more, and written less in the corresponding years of her own life.<sup>4</sup>

Many aspiring writers are so busy thinking about their own work and dreaming of fame and fortune that they don't spend nearly enough time reading. Reading is the education, the food and drink, the work and repose of the writer. Jane may have thought that she should have read more and written less when she was young, but I'm guessing she read rather more than Caroline, and I'm very glad that her early efforts have survived – they are so full of joy



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and jokes and show her responding to her reading. But Jane Austen knew that however much a writer reads, it is never enough.

*Write about things you understand*

This isn't the oft-given advice, 'Write what you know.' Jane Austen hadn't experienced what it was like to be asked to marry Mr Darcy or be as rich as Emma Woodhouse, but she could imagine. What she did was set her work in a society that she understood. She wrote to Anna in August and September 1814, 'we [Cassandra and herself] think you had better not leave England. Let the Portmans go to Ireland, but as you know nothing of the manners there, you had better not go with them. Stick to Bath and the Foresters. There you will be quite at home.'

Anna hadn't been to Ireland and would have got things wrong if she'd tried to write about it. It wasn't just that Anna didn't know the locations; she didn't know enough about the way society operated there and wouldn't have been able to capture the voices convincingly. Anna's characters could be sent there, but what happened in Ireland should stay offstage. Jane Austen captured voices that she knew – the rich and snobby that she mixed with, for instance when she stayed with her brother Edward or was in Bath, and people like Nancy Steele with her West Country accent. Jane Austen must have met more than her fair share of pompous clergymen, and through her sailor brothers was able to create the nautical characters for *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*. It isn't 'Write what you know;' it's 'Use what you know.'

*Get things right or readers will lose faith with you*

If a reader notices something and thinks, '*That wouldn't happen like that!*' you have lost them. Here is Jane pointing this out to Anna on 9 September 1814.

My Dear Anna,

We have been very much amused by your three books,<sup>5</sup> but I have a good many criticisms to make, more than you will like. We are not satisfied with Mrs Forester settling herself as tenant and near neighbour to such a man as Sir Thomas, without having some other inducement to go there. She ought to have some friend living thereabouts to tempt her. A woman going with two girls just growing up into a neighbourhood where she knows nobody but one man of not very good character, is an awkwardness which so prudent a woman as Mrs F. would not be likely to fall into. Remember she *is* very prudent. You must not let her act inconsistently. Give her a friend, and let that friend be invited by Sir Thomas H. to meet her, and we shall have no objection to her dining at the Priory as she does; but otherwise a woman in her situation would hardly go there before she had been visited by other families. I like the scene itself, the Miss Leslie, Lady Anne, and the music very much. Leslie *is* a noble name. Sir Thomas H. you always do very well. I have only taken the liberty of expunging one phrase of his which would not be allowable – 'Bless my heart!' It is too familiar and inelegant. Your grandmother is more disturbed at Mrs Forester's not returning the Egertons' visit sooner than by anything else. They ought to have called at the Parsonage before Sunday . . .



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*Get to know your characters properly*

Make sure they are consistent. Readers will soon notice if you seem to be making them up as the novel progresses. Jane's letter of 9 September 1814 continues:

Mrs Forester is not careful enough of Susan's health. Susan ought not to be walking out so soon after heavy rains, taking long walks in the dirt. An anxious mother would not suffer it. I like your Susan very much, she is a sweet creature, her playfulness of fancy is very delightful. I like her as she is *now* exceedingly, but I am not quite so well satisfied with her behaviour to George R. At first she seems all over attachment and feeling, and afterwards to have none at all; she is so extremely confused at the ball and so well satisfied apparently with Mr Morgan. She seems to have changed her character.

Readers today can see how influenced Anna was by her aunt's novels. A mother of girls who moves to a neighbourhood where she knows hardly anybody sounds rather like Mrs Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*. Jane suggests that Anna cut a section that utilizes a play (probably too much like *Mansfield Park*), and as for that lively heroine who goes out walking in the mud . . . But Anna was clearly learning from her reading.

*Don't clutter your work with unnecessary detail; cut and edit*

This is from the same letter: 'You describe a sweet place, but your descriptions are often more minute than will be liked. You give too many particulars of right hand & left.'



Jane understood that for a setting to come across as convincing, its creator needs to have all this information in her head but not all of it should appear on the page. Even if you are writing about a cluttered room, readers don't want cluttered prose and overlong descriptions. Anna needed to fix on the correct key details to use in the pictures she was painting.

*It may have happened in real life, but that doesn't mean it will work in a novel*

'I have scratched out Sir Thos. from walking with the other men to the stables, &c. the very day after his breaking his arm – for, though I find your papa *did* walk out immediately after *his* arm was set, I think it can be so little usual as to *appear* unnatural in a book.'

Aspiring novelists often feel that the events of their lives will work well in novels. This is not always so.

*And don't respond to criticism by saying, 'Yes, but . . .'*

With the broken-arm incident Jane anticipates Anna saying, 'Yes, but my father did that.' 'Yes, but . . .' doesn't cut any ice with readers. Writers who keep saying 'Yes, but' don't write the best stories.

*Think about the scale of your story and the best thing to tackle when you are starting out*

Jane Austen's famous description of her work as being painted onto a 'little bit (two inches wide) of ivory' was in a letter to her nephew, James Edward, an aspiring novelist who was to become her biographer. He had just left Winchester College, so was still a teenager, but Jane writes

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to him as though they are labouring in the same field and his efforts are as important as hers:

Chawton, Monday, Dec. 16th (1816)

My Dear E.

One reason for my writing to you now is, that I may have the pleasure of directing to you Esqre. I give you joy of having left Winchester. Now you may own how miserable you were there; now it will gradually all come out, your crimes and your miseries – how often you went up by the Mail to London and threw away fifty guineas at a tavern, and how often you were on the point of hanging yourself, restrained only, as some ill-natured aspersion upon poor old Winton has it, by the want of a tree within some miles of the city . . .

Uncle Henry writes very superior sermons. You and I must try to get hold of one or two, and put them into our novels: it would be a fine help to a volume; and we could make our heroine read it aloud on a Sunday evening, just as well as Isabella Wardour, in the 'Antiquary', is made to read the 'History of the Hartz Demon' in the ruins of St Ruth, though I believe, on recollection, Lovell is the reader. By the bye, my dear E., I am quite concerned for the loss your mother mentions in her letter. Two chapters and a half to be missing is monstrous! It is well that *I* have not been at Steventon lately, and therefore cannot be suspected of purloining them: two strong twigs and a half towards a nest of my own would have been something. I do not think however, that any theft of that sort would

be really very useful to me. What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited sketches, full of variety and glow? How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour?

So poor James Edward (the family called him Edward) had lost two and a half chapters of his novel. I'm sure his aunt was smiling when she wrote about his 'strong, manly, spirited sketches, full of variety and glow', but she was always encouraging to young writers. I think she was also quietly suggesting that he might want to tone his writing down a bit.

*Funny is good*

The things that Jane Austen praises most in Anna's writing (about which we hear the most) are the jokes and the things that will make a reader smile.

I should like to have had more of Devereux. I do not feel enough acquainted with him. You were afraid of meddling with him I dare say. I like your sketch of Lord Clanmurray, and your picture of the two young girls' enjoyment is very good. I have not noticed St Julian's serious conversation with Cecilia, but I like it exceedingly. What he says about the madness of otherwise sensible women on the subject of their daughters coming out is worth its weight in gold.

I do not perceive that the language sinks. Pray go on.<sup>6</sup>



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### *Beware of overwriting and clichés*

Overwriting is all too easy when you are carried away by the joy of writing a first draft, but it must be cut. Jane Austen told Anna, ‘Devereux Forester’s [one of Anna’s characters] being ruined by his vanity is extremely good, but I wish you would not let him plunge into a “vortex of dissipation”. I do not object to the thing, but I cannot bear the expression; it is such thorough novel slang, and so old that I daresay Adam met with it in the first novel he opened.’<sup>7</sup>

### *Edit meticulously*

Jane wrote to Cassandra that ‘an artist cannot do any thing slovenly’.<sup>8</sup> Check your prose for infelicities and repetitions. Jane noticed these in whatever she was reading, joking to Cassandra when she was writing from London in spring 1811, ‘It gives me sincere pleasure to hear of Mrs Knight’s having had a tolerable night at last, but upon this occasion I wish she had another name, for the two *nights* jingle very much.’

Editing will take you longer than composition. There were many years between Jane Austen starting writing and her first novel being published. Expect your own path to be just as long and stony.

## PLANNING YOUR NOVEL

Think about the stories that you are working with and the stories that underpin those stories.

Be aware of the archetypal narrative(s) you are working with and the power and potential that those have. It’s

well worth reading up on this.<sup>9</sup> Think about the novels, plays, poems, paintings, films, pieces of music, etc. that have influenced you and that are particularly resonant for what you are working on. Readers have spotted many different things underpinning Jane's work. For example, in *Mansfield Park* we can see echoes of *King Lear*, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and *Cinderella*.

### *Plotting*

Start by being as succinct as possible. Answer these questions in one sentence each.

1. What is the problem that must be solved in your novel?
2. What happens?
3. What is the outcome?<sup>10</sup>

If you were writing *Mansfield Park*, your answers might be:

1. Fanny Price is bullied and neglected.
2. She stays true to what she believes in.
3. Her worth is acknowledged and the villains are vanquished.

This is actually very similar to *Cinderella*. Now, again in one sentence:

4. Sum up your story – the truth at the heart of it, not the plot.



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5. What universal truth (assuming there is such a thing) does your novel prove?

Your *Mansfield Park* answers might be:

4. Fanny Price finds love and the place where she belongs.
5. Virtue will be rewarded.

Don't worry if your final answer sounds a bit like the motto from a fortune cookie.

*Mansfield Park* is the easiest of Jane Austen's novels to do this with because it has a moral plot and is so like *Cinderella*, but even *Mansfield Park* can be looked at in different ways. Henry Crawford is masquerading as a prince but is really a frog; Mrs Norris is the wicked stepmother who must be banished, and there are the love triangles to boot. The important thing is to know what your story is really about and to keep that in mind. You should look at each scene you write and ask yourself how it advances the plot and how readers will see the characters develop. Ask as many questions of your work as you can: Might readers find any of my characters too annoying? Where might my story drag?

*Autobiographies for your characters*

When you start out, write a short autobiography for each character. *Autobiography* is best because it will help you find and capture the character's voice. Each one need only be a page long. This is the sort of work that will probably stay in your notebook. It is clear from the novels how well Jane Austen knew her characters. She often included

snippets of information which demonstrated that she knew what had happened to them before the opening of the novel. Some of this information would be made known to the reader as the novel progressed, but other things just stayed in Jane's head. She also knew what would happen to the characters after the novel closed, and talked to family and friends about this. Poor Jane Fairfax, for instance, was to die after a couple of years' marriage to Frank Churchill.

For your characters' autobiographies, think about their backgrounds, their families, their situations in society, etc. What might they have lost? What will they be longing for? Here are some snippets from Jane Austen's backstories, which show how well she knew her creations.

From Mr Darcy's letter to Elizabeth in Chapter 35 of *Pride and Prejudice* after she has turned down his first offer of marriage:

Mr Wickham is the son of a very respectable man, who had for many years the management of all the Pemberley estates, and whose good conduct in the discharge of his trust naturally inclined my father to be of service to him; and on George Wickham, who was his godson, his kindness was therefore liberally bestowed [ . . . ]

My excellent father died about five years ago; and his attachment to Mr Wickham was to the last so steady, that in his will he particularly recommended it to me, to promote his advancement in the best manner that his profession might allow – and if he took orders, desired that a valuable family living might be his as soon as it became vacant. There was also a legacy of one thousand pounds. His own father did not long survive mine,



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and within half a year from these events, Mr Wickham wrote to inform me that, having finally resolved against taking orders, he hoped I should not think it unreasonable for him to expect some more immediate pecuniary advantage, in lieu of the preferment, by which he could not be benefited. He had some intention, he added, of studying the law, and I must be aware that the interest of one thousand pounds would be a very insufficient support therein. I rather wished than believed him to be sincere; but, at any rate, was perfectly ready to accede to his proposal. I knew that Mr Wickham ought not to be a clergyman; the business was therefore soon settled – he resigned all claim to assistance in the church, were it possible that he could ever be in a situation to receive it, and accepted in return three thousand pounds. All connexion between us seemed now dissolved. I thought too ill of him to invite him to Pemberley, or admit his society in town. In town I believe he chiefly lived, but his studying the law was a mere pretence, and being now free from all restraint, his life was a life of idleness and dissipation. For about three years I heard little of him; but on the decease of the incumbent of the living which had been designed for him, he applied to me again by letter for the presentation. His circumstances, he assured me, and I had no difficulty in believing it, were exceedingly bad. He had found the law a most unprofitable study, and was now absolutely resolved on being ordained, if I would present him to the living in question – of which he trusted there could be little doubt, as he was well assured that I had no other person to provide for, and I could not have forgotten

my revered father's intentions. You will hardly blame me for refusing to comply with this entreaty, or for resisting every repetition of it. His resentment was in proportion to the distress of his circumstances – and he was doubtless as violent in his abuse of me to others as in his reproaches to myself. After this period every appearance of acquaintance was dropt. How he lived I know not. But last summer he was again most painfully obtruded on my notice.

I must now mention a circumstance which I would wish to forget myself, and which no obligation less than the present should induce me to unfold to any human being. Having said thus much, I feel no doubt of your secrecy. My sister, who is more than ten years my junior, was left to the guardianship of my mother's nephew, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and myself. About a year ago, she was taken from school, and an establishment formed for her in London; and last summer she went with the lady who presided over it, to Ramsgate; and thither also went Mr Wickham, undoubtedly by design; for there proved to have been a prior acquaintance between him and Mrs Younge, in whose character we were most unhappily deceived; and by her connivance and aid he so far recommended himself to Georgiana, whose affectionate heart retained a strong impression of his kindness to her as a child, that she was persuaded to believe herself in love, and to consent to an elopement. She was then but fifteen, which must be her excuse; and after stating her imprudence, I am happy to add that I owed the knowledge of it to herself. I joined them unexpectedly a day or two before the intended elopement, and then



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Georgiana, unable to support the idea of grieving and offending a brother whom she almost looked up to as a father, acknowledged the whole to me. You may imagine what I felt and how I acted. Regard for my sister's credit and feelings prevented any public exposure, but I wrote to Mr Wickham, who left the place immediately, and Mrs Younge was of course removed from her charge. Mr Wickham's chief object was unquestionably my sister's fortune, which is thirty thousand pounds; but I cannot help supposing that the hope of revenging himself on me was a strong inducement. His revenge would have been complete indeed.

In the opening chapter of *Mansfield Park* we are given the story of three sisters, one of them Fanny Price's poor mother. What is really interesting here is that it was Mrs Norris who provoked the sisters' falling-out.

About thirty years ago Miss Maria Ward, of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income. All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it. She had two sisters to be benefited by her elevation; and such of their acquaintance as thought Miss Ward and Miss Frances quite as handsome as Miss Maria, did not scruple to predict their marrying with almost equal



advantage. But there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world as there are pretty women to deserve them. Miss Ward, at the end of half a dozen years, found herself obliged to be attached to the Rev. Mr Norris, a friend of her brother-in-law, with scarcely any private fortune, and Miss Frances fared yet worse. Miss Ward's match, indeed, when it came to the point, was not contemptible: Sir Thomas being happily able to give his friend an income in the living of Mansfield; and Mr and Mrs Norris began their career of conjugal felicity with very little less than a thousand a year. But Miss Frances married, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family, and by fixing on a lieutenant of marines, without education, fortune, or connexions, did it very thoroughly. She could hardly have made a more untoward choice. Sir Thomas Bertram had interest, which, from principle as well as pride – from a general wish of doing right, and a desire of seeing all that were connected with him in situations of respectability, he would have been glad to exert for the advantage of Lady Bertram's sister; but her husband's profession was such as no interest could reach; and before he had time to devise any other method of assisting them, an absolute breach between the sisters had taken place. It was the natural result of the conduct of each party, and such as a very imprudent marriage almost always produces. To save herself from useless remonstrance, Mrs Price never wrote to her family on the subject till actually married. Lady Bertram, who was a woman of very tranquil feelings, and a temper remarkably easy and indolent, would have contented herself with merely giving up her sister, and thinking no more of the matter; but



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Mrs Norris had a spirit of activity, which could not be satisfied till she had written a long and angry letter to Fanny, to point out the folly of her conduct, and threaten her with all its possible ill consequences. Mrs Price, in her turn, was injured and angry; and an answer, which comprehended each sister in its bitterness, and bestowed such very disrespectful reflections on the pride of Sir Thomas as Mrs Norris could not possibly keep to herself, put an end to all intercourse between them for a considerable period.

### EXERCISES

1. Write an autobiography for each of your characters. You must choose a point in time from which each one will be speaking; I'd suggest just before the moment when you plan to open the novel.
2. Write a scene in which we see one of your characters *before* the main action of the novel. This kind of work will remain in your notebook, never to be seen by a reader, but you should be prepared to do this sort of thing.

### THINKING ABOUT YOUR SETTING

Remember that setting means time as well as place. You should know exactly when your novel is set as well as where. Don't think that you can make the novel 'timeless' or 'universal' as your assumptions and those of the characters will make this impossible. Readers want to be taken to particular

places and to see them at a specific time. Jane Austen very deliberately told us where and when her novels were set, and when *Northanger Abbey* was published more than a decade after it was written, she deemed it necessary to explain the delay so that readers had the correct context for the work.

This little work was finished in the year 1803, and intended for immediate publication. It was disposed of to a bookseller, it was even advertised, and why the business proceeded no farther, the author has never been able to learn. That any bookseller should think it worth-while to purchase what he did not think it worth-while to publish seems extraordinary. But with this, neither the author nor the public have any other concern than as some observation is necessary upon those parts of the work which thirteen years have made comparatively obsolete. The public are entreated to bear in mind that thirteen years have passed since it was finished, many more since it was begun, and that during that period, places, manners, books, and opinions have undergone considerable changes.<sup>11</sup>

Researchers have been able to work out that Jane Austen used the calendar of a particular year as she plotted and wrote each novel. Doing this makes the story work for readers, who won't be distracted by thoughts such as '*But I thought it was autumn!*' or '*I thought she was twenty-six!*' and also makes it much easier for the writer to keep everything under control.

It's important to know and establish your locations properly too. There's more to help you with locations later



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on, but this is to get you started. Fans of Austen's work are often keen to identify the 'real' Pemberley or the 'real' 'Meryton'. However, I believe that she, like so many writers, combined elements of different places while adding details of her own invention. She also often used a technique that filmmakers employ – giving the reader a long shot or panorama of a place as well as an interior, where we see things much closer up.

Here are some of these shots – or perhaps we should use the language of painting for Georgian novels – from *Sense and Sensibility*. The reader travels with Mrs Dashwood and her daughters to their new home in Devonshire and then walks with them around the house before the eye is allowed to linger on some particular things: Marianne's piano being unpacked and pictures by Elinor being hung on the walls. Marianne is the musician and so likes to perform and make a noise – 'her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation'. Elinor is the quieter one, 'who possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother'. Her expertise lies in observation.

We get additional pictures with the arrival of Sir John Middleton, who gives them 'a large basket full of garden stuff and fruit' from the park, which is followed before the end of the day by 'a present of game'; he also 'sends them his newspaper every day'. We already know it is September so can imagine the harvest-festival-style basket of goodies. These details contrast starkly with what we have seen of the staggering meanness of John and Fanny Dashwood, Mrs Dashwood's stepson and his wife, in the



opening chapters. These pictures, then, are not just about the setting but establish the characters too.

The first part of their journey was performed in too melancholy a disposition to be otherwise than tedious and unpleasant. But as they drew towards the end of it, their interest in the appearance of a country which they were to inhabit overcame their dejection, and a view of Barton Valley as they entered it gave them cheerfulness. It was a pleasant fertile spot, well wooded, and rich in pasture. After winding along it for more than a mile, they reached their own house. A small green court was the whole of its demesne in front; and a neat wicket gate admitted them into it.

As a house, Barton Cottage, though small, was comfortable and compact; but as a cottage it was defective, for the building was regular, the roof was tiled, the window shutters were not painted green, nor were the walls covered with honeysuckles. A narrow passage led directly through the house into the garden behind. On each side of the entrance was a sitting room, about sixteen feet square; and beyond them were the offices and the stairs. Four bed-rooms and two garrets formed the rest of the house. It had not been built many years and was in good repair. In comparison of Norland, it was poor and small indeed! – but the tears which recollection called forth as they entered the house were soon dried away. They were cheered by the joy of the servants on their arrival, and each for the sake of the others resolved to appear happy. It was very early in September; the season was fine, and from first seeing

the place under the advantage of good weather, they received an impression in its favour which was of material service in recommending it to their lasting approbation.

The situation of the house was good. High hills rose immediately behind, and at no great distance on each side; some of which were open downs, the others cultivated and woody. The village of Barton was chiefly on one of these hills, and formed a pleasant view from the cottage windows. The prospect in front was more extensive; it commanded the whole of the valley, and reached into the country beyond. The hills which surrounded the cottage terminated the valley in that direction; under another name, and in another course, it branched out again between two of the steepest of them.

With the size and furniture of the house Mrs Dashwood was upon the whole well satisfied; for though her former style of life rendered many additions to the latter indispensable, yet to add and improve was a delight to her; and she had at this time ready money enough to supply all that was wanted of greater elegance to the apartments. 'As for the house itself, to be sure,' said she, 'it is too small for our family, but we will make ourselves tolerably comfortable for the present, as it is too late in the year for improvements. Perhaps in the spring, if I have plenty of money, as I dare say I shall, we may think about building. These parlors are both too small for such parties of our friends as I hope to see often collected here; and I have some thoughts of throwing the passage into one of them with perhaps a part of the

other, and so leave the remainder of that other for an entrance; this, with a new drawing-room which may be easily added, and a bed-chamber and garret above, will make it a very snug little cottage. I could wish the stairs were handsome. But one must not expect everything; though I suppose it would be no difficult matter to widen them. I shall see how much I am before-hand with the world in the spring, and we will plan our improvements accordingly.'

In the mean time, till all these alterations could be made from the savings of an income of five hundred a-year by a woman who never saved in her life, they were wise enough to be contented with the house as it was; and each of them was busy in arranging their particular concerns, and endeavouring, by placing around them books and other possessions, to form themselves a home. Marianne's pianoforte was unpacked and properly disposed of; and Elinor's drawings were affixed to the walls of their sitting room.

EXERCISE: PANORAMAS, LONG SHOTS,  
INTERIORS AND DETAILS

Write a scene that gives us a long shot or panorama of your location and a scene that gives us a close-up of an important room or place. You may want to include characters in these scenes. Think about the point of view. It often works well to have somebody new to the place observing things so that they are seen with fresh eyes.