

6.11 Classic Short Cuts: Pride and Prejudice

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I offer my respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

[upbeat, twinkly piano music fades in]

Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library, a podcast all about stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[theme music fades out]

Angourie [host]

Before I begin this episode, I just want to give a little warning that there are lots of birds hanging around today, just outside my window, on my roof, and they're all doing their very fun and interesting and loud bird calls. So, if you hear that in the background, that's what that is. But, with that aside, I want to talk to you about one of the greatest love stories ever written. About a man and a woman who seem to despise each other at first, before falling madly in love and living happily ever after. But are you perhaps intimidated to pick up the original book? Maybe I can help. If you haven't visited The Community Library before, hello and welcome! My name is Angourie, I'm an actor, writer, podcaster, and I make episodes about all kinds of books and stories from all different time periods, but I am particularly interested in classics, and making them more accessible to a wide range of readers. One of my favourite books of all time is *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. I love it so much that my mum and I wrote a modern retelling called *Stuck Up and Stupid*, which will be published by Walker Books in Australia on the 1st of November, if you're interested. Just a shameless plug there. But my love of *Pride and Prejudice* and Jane Austen in general, runs deep and true, and though she certainly doesn't need my publicity, her reputation might need a bit of help when it comes to being highbrow and stuffy. Welcome to Classic Short Cuts: a series not to listen to instead of reading the book, but rather some helpful tips and things to know before you go into it, which will hopefully make your reading experience easier and more enjoyable.

Jane's Life

You can't have a book without an author, so let's start with a bit of background on Jane Austen herself. Jane Austen was born to George and Cassandra Austen in North Hampshire, England in 1775. She grew up the second youngest of eight siblings, all boys except for her older sister Cassandra, with whom she was very close. Jane's father George was a rector, and though family moved in upper-class circles, they were not super rich. Her father had a

modest income, and her mother had brought a small inheritance to the marriage. Jane and her sister Cassandra were sent to Oxford when they were seven and ten years old, respectively, but their formal education ended after just three years, when their George could no longer afford to pay the school fees. So from the age of ten, Jane was educated at home, largely by her father and older brothers. What did she do to fill her days as a child and teenager? With no school and no financial independence, she had nowhere to go and no one to talk to but her family and neighbours. Her entire life was bound up in society and community. She would go to church, read in her father's library, invite people over, and ... what else? Well, it's no wonder that she found a hobby. From as young as twelve, Jane began writing poems and stories to amuse her family. Her young writings ranged from a satirical history of England to the wild adventures of a lady called Cassandra – presumably written for her sister. Then, when Jane was barely twenty, she began writing her first novel, entitled *Elinor and Marianne*. She read it aloud to her family while she was working on it, and when it was done, she began on a second novel, *First Impressions*. She finished it in 1796, when she was just twenty-one years old. From there, she began working on a third novel entitled *Susan*, but it would be fifteen years before any of her works were published, and all three with different titles.

Publishing

Becoming a published female author in the early 1800s was a tough gig. Though works by women *were* published, they were often published anonymously, and were not really considered 'literature'. Fiction by women in Jane Austen's time was regarded as fun, light, trivial entertainment for wives and daughters. In other words, not clever, and not important. Nonetheless, Jane Austen was able to get her works published with the help of her brother, Henry. By this time, *Elinor and Marianne* had become *Sense and Sensibility*. Published in 1811 and authored 'By a Lady', it became quite a success. Her next novel, *First Impressions*, had by then been retitled as *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane sold the manuscript of *Pride and Prejudice* to the publisher for a flat fee of £110, which – check out this inflation – converts to £9,700 today, or if you're in the US, that's \$12,500 USD, or if you're in Australia like me, that's \$18,800 AUD. It sounds like a lot of money, but had she sold *Pride and Prejudice* on commission, meaning she would have received a percentage of every copy sold, she would have earned four times as much. *Pride and Prejudice* was credited "By the author of *Sense and Sensibility*", as were her remaining four novels. None of her novels were credited to her during her lifetime. It was only after her death that Jane's brother Henry identified Jane Austen as the author.

Context

I tell you all of this not to bore you – hopefully you're not bored – but to give you some context around the environment Jane Austen was writing in. Though writing gave Jane some financial independence, it was not considered a viable career. In fact, it wasn't considered a career at all. That's why her books were published anonymously: such was the fashion for women writers at the time, to show that they didn't need acclaim or recognition, because writing wasn't a serious pursuit, it was a hobby. Jane no doubt loved writing, she began from such an early age, and her letters to her sister Cassandra are no less witty and clever than her books. But imagine, this thing you love to do, and you go as far as you can: you are

published, people read it, you get a small income from it. But it's not credited to you. It's not a serious life's pursuit. It's humble, and it's quaint. It's considered just a thing to pass the time.

People often dismiss Jane Austen's works for being boring. Her books are about people going to other people's houses and having dinners or dances or picnics. She writes about a very insular world. But can you blame her? She was writing about her world: her small world of gossip and drama and flirtations and engagements. She didn't go to school, she didn't have money to travel – even if she did, women rarely travelled alone, usually with their husbands, and Jane never married. Her talent was observing the community around her, noticing patterns in relationships, judging the behaviour of the rich, and understanding the class imbalances and intricacies of etiquette. I feel sorry for Jane that her works were never credited to her during her lifetime, but something tells me she didn't really mind. She had a wicked sense of humour, and I think she was happy in her quiet family life. She wrote not because she wanted to impress, but because she wanted to hold up a mirror to the people and places she knew.

Things to keep track of

So now you know Jane Austen's background, let's talk about what to look out for once you actually start reading *Pride and Prejudice*. If you know nothing about it: Here's the gist of what it's about. Mrs Bennet is the mother of five unmarried daughters. When two rich men come to town, she is determined for at least one of her daughters to marry one of them. While Jane, the eldest, gets along great with Mr Bingley, one of the rich men, Elizabeth Bennet, the second-eldest daughter, clashes with the other rich man: Mr Darcy. Through family drama and embarrassing situations, Elizabeth might come find Darcy not as stuck-up as he first seemed.

Jane Austen's works are not, in my opinion, particularly difficult to read and understand. Her writing style is pretty straight forward, even if she does write in long sentences, and the content is easy to understand: it's conversations about people and parties. The difficulty, I think, lies in keeping track of all the characters. Back in Jane Austen's time, there was a particular way of referring to members of each family. It was impolite to refer to people by their first names unless you were very familiar with them. Now, this becomes complicated when Mr and Mrs Bennet have five unmarried daughters who are all referred to as Miss Bennet. To help you, as a general rule, the eldest daughter, Jane, is referred to as Miss Bennet, and the younger daughters are referred to by their first and last name, for example: Miss Elizabeth Bennet, Miss Mary Bennet. There will probably be times when you're not sure who's speaking, but that is common in Jane Austen's works, I find. You can usually pick it up from context clues, and if you're still unsure, you can move on and your overall reading experience won't be affected.

Another difficulty with *Pride and Prejudice* is all the characters' relationships with each other. It's a story about community, and she introduces many different characters in Elizabeth Bennet's life. I recommend googling a family tree or character map for *Pride and Prejudice*. But if you don't want to be spoilt about who gets together with who, then I recommend writing one yourself. I often keep a scrap of paper with all the characters and

where they live tucked in the front page of the book, so I can add as I read, and refer to it as needed.

Themes to look out for

Next, I want to talk about themes to look out for. Let's begin with the title. Jane Austen gives us two big themes of the book: Pride, and prejudice. Mr Darcy represents the pride. He is dismissive of Elizabeth and her family because they're beneath his social standing. And when he develops feelings for Elizabeth, his pride gets in the way of him expressing himself. Elizabeth, meanwhile, represents the prejudice. When she first meets Darcy, he is rude and standoffish, and her bad impression of him colours everything else he does. You'll see the pride and the prejudice come out in Elizabeth and Darcy's first interaction, and you'll notice how this influences their attitudes towards each other for the rest of the book. The whole plot happens because of their misguided first impressions of one another. Remember, *First Impressions* was Austen's original title for the book.

But this book is about so much more than just Elizabeth and Darcy. You should also look out for the theme of community. How do the pressures of society influence the decisions of the Bennet sisters? How does society's opinion and tradition affect their mother? Though the Bennets move in the upper circles, they are not uber rich – much like Austen's own family's situation. Mrs Bennet is anxious to get her daughters married, not just because she's a helicopter parent, but because she's acutely aware of how marriage is the only way for her daughters to secure their future. This book is a portrait of early 1800s society, particularly the relationships between mothers and daughters, and the communities they create within themselves. Elizabeth's whole world revolves around family, and neighbours, and community, much like Jane Austen's did. They're both keen observers and sometimes criticsers of tradition, custom, and behaviour.

Overall, something I want to impress upon tentative readers of *Pride and Prejudice*, is that you're going to get so much more than a romance. It's a comedy, it's a coming-of-age, it's a family drama. It's got comedians and villains, it's got wit and heart. It's not a sappy love story – not that there's anything wrong with that – but it's a novel about a young woman navigating family embarrassments and community gossip. Which is still, I think, something we can all relate to.

[upbeat, twinkly piano music fades in]

Conclusion

If you were previously hesitant to pick up *Pride and Prejudice*, I hope this has been helpful. If you're interested in reading a contemporary retelling of the book, my mum and I have co-written a novel call *Stuck Up and Stupid*, which will be out in Australia from Walker Books on the 1st of November, so mark your calendars! If you liked this episode, I have another one in the classic short cuts series about *Frankenstein*, which I'll have linked in the show notes for you. Thank you for listening, and I'll talk to you in two weeks' time. Bye!