

# REJECTING

# Jane



**David Lassman investigates how Jane Austen would have fared in today's publishing world**



40 GAY STREET  
BATH BA1 2NT  
08 February 2007

BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING  
36 SOHO SQUARE  
LONDON W1D 3QY

Dear Sir / Madam

My name is Miss Alison Laydee and I am enclosing the first two chapters of my debut novel, entitled '**Susan**', for possible publication by your firm.

It is set in the early 1800s in and around the wonderful city of Bath and follows the adventures of a young girl who comes to stay for a holiday. While there she begins the transition to womanhood, eventually falling in love and marrying her ideal man. I suppose you would call it a Regency Romance (does this type of writing exist? because if not, I think there would be a great demand for it, especially from women readers). As for its length, I believe it to be approximately 90,000 words long.

I have been writing since I was 11 years old and although I have written poetry and other writings, this is my first completed novel; although I have started several others.

I was born in Hampshire, but now luckily live in Bath. The city is I feel, an ideal setting for a romantic novel, especially one of an historical nature and I believe living here has helped inspire me to complete it.

Without wishing to seem immodest, I believe '**Susan**' will be seen as a 'delight' by anyone who reads it and would, if I may be so forthright, also make a charming film.

Although I am quite young myself (although A Laydee does not reveal her age!!) my insights into the lives of my own gender, both historically and contemporary, are, I believe, very accurate and so will win praise from other women everywhere.

I enclose a stamped addressed envelope and look forward to hearing from you very, very soon.

Yours sincerely

Alison Laydee

'It is a truth universally acknowledged,' Jane Austen famously wrote, 'that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.'

It now sadly also seems a truth to be universally acknowledged that a single woman in possession of a good novel (or, in this case, six of them) must be in want of both a publisher and an agent. If Jane Austen was alive today and attempting to bring to the reading public any of her books, including *Pride and Prejudice*, she would be sorely disappointed at the very first hurdle.

But how can that be so? Here is the authoress of six major novels that are taught throughout the world, adored by millions and of which at least four reside as acknowledged classics in the Western literary canon. Surely a writer with such talent would be able to find recognition in whatever time period they were writing? As they say though, the truth is nearly always stranger than any fiction...

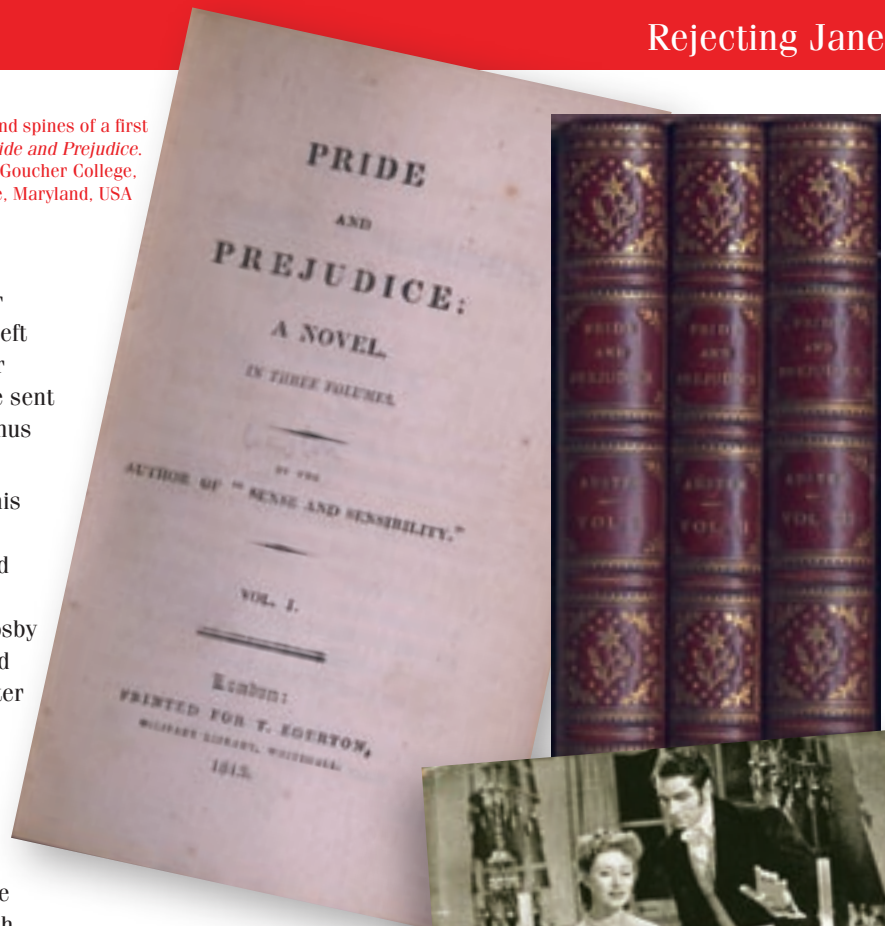
The idea of how Jane Austen would have fared in today's publishing world was born out of this writer's own fruitless attempt to become published. Having spent three and a half years writing what he believed to be, if not a modern classic, certainly a saleable novel, the belief and hope that accompanied each envelope to various agents and publishers were quickly squashed by a succession of rejection letters.

Once in place, the idea quickly fell together. 'Jane' would send out her novels in the standard way any aspiring novelist today is advised to do. That is:

the first two or three chapters of their completed novel, a brief synopsis and a covering letter;

then the full novel being requested if any agent or publisher is interested.

Title page and spines of a first edition of *Pride and Prejudice*.  
© courtesy of Goucher College,  
Baltimore, Maryland, USA



Three of her books were chosen for this 'treatment' and apart from the title and major character names, the sample chapters were left EXACTLY as she had written them; letting her writing speak for itself. Each 'book' would be sent to four different publishers and two agents, thus making a total of 18 'packages' in all.

The first novel was *Northanger Abbey*. This was deliberate, because although published posthumously, it was the first to be completed by Jane and had its own 'history' within the publishing world. Having been bought by Crosby & Co in 1803, it lay on their shelf unpublished until the authoress herself bought it back (after the success of *Sense and Sensibility*), the publisher never knowing what they had on their hands.

*Northanger Abbey* had actually been bought under its original title of 'Susan' and this was the one chosen to be used on the front cover of the chapters to be sent out, with heroine Catherine Morland assuming the less famous name of Susan Maldorn. On the top sheet, the writer's name was listed as Alison Laydee (a play on the 'A. Lady', a pseudonym Jane used for *Sense and Sensibility*) while the return address on the required SAE's was that of 40 Gay Street, Bath (home to the Jane Austen Centre!). The packages were then duly sent and the anticipation as to how the publishing world would greet this 'aspiring novelist' began. There wasn't long to wait...

'I read [the sample chapters of *Susan*] with interest,' said Jennifer Vale of Bloomsbury Publishing (publishers of the *Harry Potter* series), 'but I'm afraid to say I didn't feel that the book was suited to our list.' Jennifer, though, did kindly offer the services of a literary consultant who, she said, would be more than happy to give advice on 'Alison's' writing.

There was no time to feel dumbfounded, however, as hard on its heels was another letter, this time from a well-known literary agency. 'Having considered [the] material', Peter Fraser & Dunlop regretfully said, they did not feel 'sufficiently confident about being the right people to represent it successfully.'

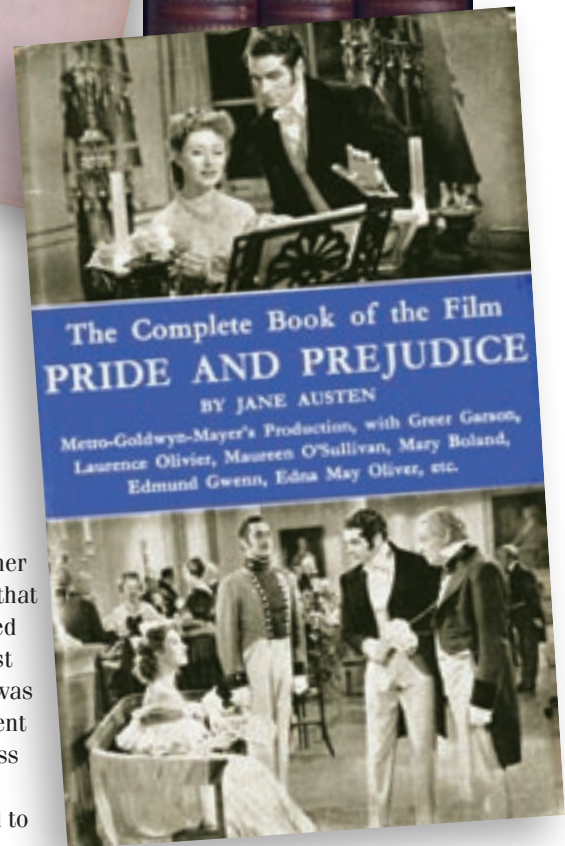
And so incredulously, one by one the rest of the rejection letters came back. Billie Hope, writing on behalf of agents Gillon Aitken, also felt they could not offer the representation sought, while Random

House once more found the work 'not suitable for our lists'.

Once the initial disbelief had subsided, a glimmer of recognition dawned. Perhaps, after all, *Northanger Abbey* was not Jane's strongest effort. It has sometimes been acknowledged as perhaps her weakest novel and so with that in mind, it was with renewed hope that her final and most mature work, *Persuasion*, was given the 'treatment' and sent out. Again the same address and pseudonym were used, while the title was changed to *The Watsons*.

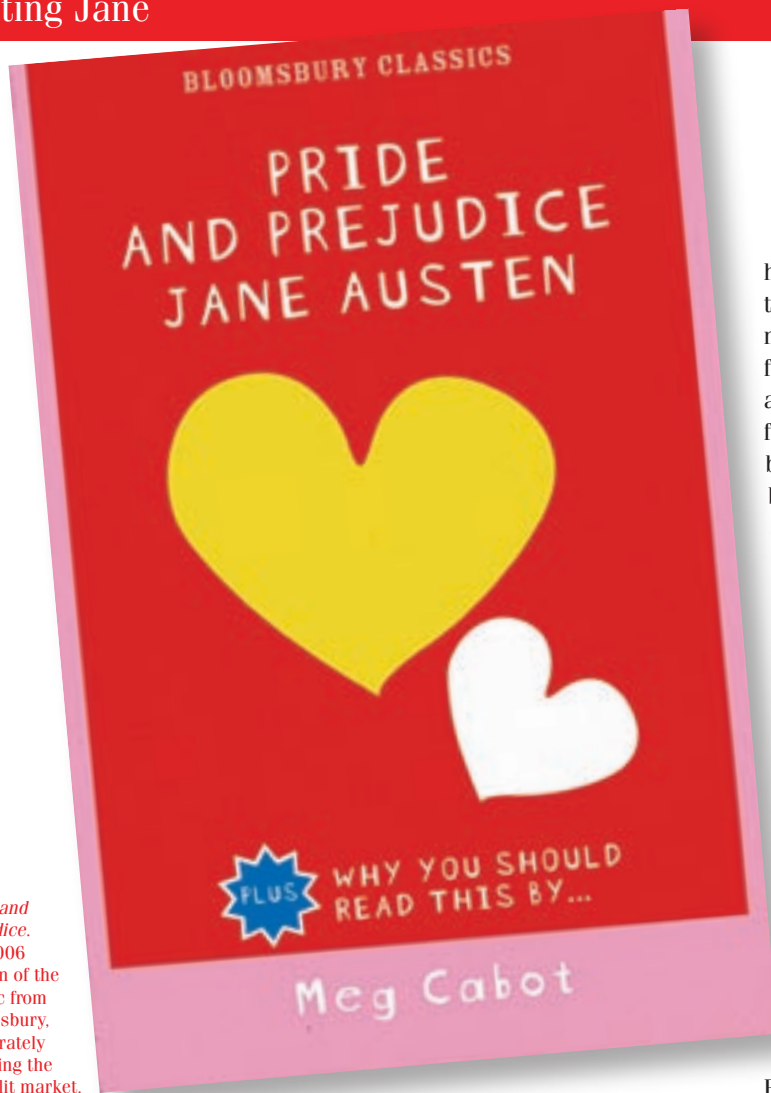
Simon & Schuster, Hodder & Stoughton and Pan rejected it out of hand, citing the fact they did not accept unsolicited submissions (meaning only through an agent), while Constable and Robinson were not publishing any new fiction (obviously even if it was a major work of literature).

Of the two agents *The Watsons* was sent to, the first, Casarotto Ramsey, did not represent authors of books (only film and TV writers), while



*Pride and Prejudice*. A pocket book published during WWII by JM Dent; no. 22 in the Everyman's Library series. Bound in salmon cloth with gilt title; complete dust wrapper with illustrations from the MGM film.

*Pride and Prejudice.* The 2006 version of the classic from Bloomsbury, deliberately targeting the chick-lit market.



the other, Christopher Little (JK Rowling's literary agency), was so busy with authors they needed to be extremely highly selective with any new ones. And sadly for our Alison, they were 'not confident of placing this material with a publisher...[so they] must therefore turn down [her request for representation]'.

With both Jane's first and last completed novels now universally rejected, it was time for the final opportunity for the industry to redeem itself in recognising greatness when they received it.

Reverting back to Jane's original title, *First Impressions*, and once more only changing major character and place names, the six packages containing the opening two chapters of the most famous and popular of Jane's books was sent out with everything else, INCLUDING ONE OF THE MOST CELEBRATED OPENING LINES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE, left intact. Surely this one would be accepted and if not accepted, then at the very least recognised for what it really was: *Pride and Prejudice*.

The first reply, from Pan MacMillan, did neither, however, returning the chapters unread due to the volume of submissions they receive, which now included the book voted the nation's all-time favourite. The Blake Friedmann literary agency at least did read it, but was 'sorry to say we don't feel that strongly about your work' – the 'we' being the 'several of us here [that] would need to be extremely enthusiastic about both the content and the writing style', which obviously they were not. Literary agents Curtis Brown could not offer representation to Alison either, but this time the onus was on them, as they had no agent within their organisation who they felt was suitable to place her material with any publisher.

Penguin then wrote back. 'Thank you for your recent letter and chapters from your book *First Impressions*,' they said. 'It seems like a really original and interesting read.' Unfortunately for Penguin, however, they neither requested to see the rest of the novel nor recognised a work they already publish within their 'Penguin Classics' series.

Before complete hopelessness and disbelief could descend, however, the following letter from Jonathan Cape duly arrived. In it Alex Bowler, Assistant Editor at Jonathan Cape, wrote: 'Thank you for sending us the first two chapters of *First Impressions*; my first impressions on reading these were ones of disbelief and mild annoyance – along, of course, with a moment's laughter. I suggest you reach for your copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, which I'd guess lives in close proximity to your typewriter, and make sure that your opening pages don't too closely mimic that book's opening – there is, after all, such a thing as plagiarism, and I'd hate for you to get in any kind of trouble with Jane Austen's estate. All the best, and thanks for a truly exceptional submission.'

So where does this leave the original question of how Jane Austen would have fared in today's publishing industry. At the time of writing, 15 out of 18 submissions have been returned and out of these, only one person recognised the material for what it was – classic literature written by one of the greatest writers that has ever lived. So it seems a fair assumption that if Jane Austen's reputation had not already been secure, she would have struggled even to find an agent to represent her, let alone have any of her novels published.

## SYNOPSIS

'First Impressions' is an historical romantic comedy set in 19th-century England and explores what happens when judgements about people are made too quickly; the 'first impressions' of the title.

Catherine Barnett, known as Kizzy, is the heroine of the novel. She is the second eldest daughter, an attractive high-spirited girl, who although just out of her teens, has an older, wiser head on her shoulders.

Her mother's aim in life is to marry off Kizzy to a rich man, much to her daughter's chagrin, as Kizzy believes in true love and is determined not to marry just for money.

In the course of the novel she therefore turns down two proposals, each for a different reason, but on receiving a third, which is given from true love, she accepts and lives happily ever after. The twist though, is that she has met the man she is destined to marry early in the book, but the course of true love does not run smooth through their 'First Impressions' of each other, until both realise their misunderstanding.

The timeless and universal romantic themes of 'First Impressions' will appeal to an audience that not only loves a good romantic read, but also appreciates the finer points of feminine writing.

Alison Laydee  
February 2007

What would Jane herself have made of this situation? Would she have despaired at the publishing world not recognising her 'little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory', or would she have raised a smile and done what she did best: turn her hand to writing about people she observed in the world she found herself inhabiting; namely a publishing industry too blinkered to recognise great literature when offered it.

The only problem she would then have had, of course, would have been finding an agent and publisher for this new book as well; and so in the end having ultimately to acknowledge as a universal truth that she would have been better off having lived 200 years earlier! 📖

David Lassman was born in Bath. He has written for newspapers and magazines, as well as appearing on television, radio and film. David returned to Bath last summer, having spent the last three and a half years on a Greek island writing a novel. He is the new Director of the Jane Austen Festival.

## CHAPTER ONE

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

'My dear Mr Barnett,' said his lady to him one day, 'have you heard that Weatherfield Manor is let at last?'

Mr Barnett replied that he had not.

'But it is,' returned she; 'for Mrs Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.'

Mr Barnett made no answer.

'Do not you want to know who has taken it?' cried his wife impatiently.

'You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.'

This was invitation enough.

'Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs Long says that Weatherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week.'

'What is his name?'

'Lingbye.'

'Is he married or single?'

'Oh! single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!'

'How so? how can it affect them?'

'My dear Mr Barnett,' replied his wife, 'how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them.'

'Is that his design in settling here?'

'Design! nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he may fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes.'

'I see no occasion for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better, for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr Lingbye might like you the best of the party.'

'My dear, you flatter me. I certainly have had my share of beauty, but I do not pretend to be any thing extraordinary now. When a woman has five grown up daughters, she ought to give over thinking of her own beauty.'

'In such cases, a woman has not often much beauty to think of.'

To see David's online journal, go to [janeausten.co.uk](http://janeausten.co.uk)

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