

# Jane Austen and Her Legacy in the Modern World

**PURPOSE:** To travel to the Jane Austen Festival in Louisville, Kentucky and discover why the author is still widely celebrated 200 years following her death



Festival-goers enjoy an afternoon picnic

## INTRODUCTION

With millions of admirers worldwide, Jane Austen remains one of the most influential and beloved authors in the British canon. Born in December of 1775, Austen wrote six novels and a collection of short works, collectively called the Juvenilia. Four novels were published during her lifetime: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*. After her death in July of 1817, her brother Henry and sister Cassandra published her final completed novels—*Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*.

While her name may be familiar to people all over the world—because of the countless film and television adaptations of her works—Austen is celebrated by one particular group with the greatest admiration and reverence. Members of this group refer to themselves as “Janeites.” These dedicated enthusiasts read the books, watch the movies and miniseries, collect memorabilia, and participate in the Jane Austen Society. This society has offshoots worldwide, from England to Singapore, Australia to Pakistan. The love of Austen transcends regions and cultures.

Founded in 1979 by Joan Austen-Leigh, Henry G. Burke, and J. David Grey, the Jane Austen Society of North America (JASNA) celebrates the beloved author and her novels in 80 regional groups across the continent. A non-profit organization staffed by volunteers, this society shares a vision and a mission for its members and disciples: “Because literature has the power to change and enrich our lives, we want to see more people reading the great authors, with special emphasis on Jane Austen.” The their mission “is to foster among the widest number of readers the study, appreciation, and understanding of Jane Austen’s works, her life, and her genius.”



Portrait of Jane Austen engraved in 1873 for Evert A. Duyckink's Portrait Gallery of Eminent Men and Women of Europe and America

From July 13-15 of 2018, the JASNA of Louisville, Kentucky hosted the 10th Annual Jane Austen Festival. Approximately 2,400 Janeites were in attendance at Locust Grove—the 55-acre 18th-century farm site and National Historic Landmark—from over 21 states nationwide. We traveled to the festival in hopes to gain a better understanding of Austen’s intrigue on modern audiences. What keeps Austen and her works relevant more than 200 years after her death? We interviewed attendees of the festival, and found a variety of factors that contribute to her lasting popularity .



Attendees review weekend itinerary



Taking a turn about the garden

Abigail Alderdice (English Literature)  
Eden Alderdice (Communication Studies)  
Mentor: Dr. Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick



Ben Bartgis instructs workshop on Writing in Austen's Time

## FINDINGS

Two women from New Jersey believed that the appreciation of Austen is only “newly celebrated” because of the film and TV adaptations; these have introduced her to a new crowd who would have otherwise not known the stories.

“She was a modern woman in her time,” offered an attendee from Kansas. “She created the archetype for a strong, independent female character. They did not entirely desire or require marriage in order to be happy.”

Patrick Stokes—a direct descendant of Jane Austen’s own brother, Admiral Charles Austen—was in attendance at the festival and gave a lecture on England’s Royal Navy in Austen’s time. When interviewed, he shared with us that he believes the reasons for her everlasting notoriety are because she told timeless stories and was ahead of her time. According to Stokes, “[Austen] was an astute observer of life. [Possessing] wit, enormous wit.”

Able to experience the pastimes and enjoyments Austen would have, the festival-goers could immersed themselves in the traditional Regency customs—dressing in Regency fashion, participating in tea time—while also attending educational lectures that examined everyday practices of the era. Exploring the postal system, fashion trends, and the Royal Navy of the Regency era, those in attendance were able to deepen their understanding of the life their beloved author lived.

## CONCLUSION

What about Austen, her life, and her legacy intrigues this international subculture? In attending the festival and interviewing Janeites from all over the nation, we came to understand how the everlasting legacy of Jane Austen has been able to stand the tests of time. Whether it be for her biting wit, romantic stories, or observations of human nature, her devotees can agree on one thing: she is timeless. In addition to her timelessness, she was a woman who expressed modern ideas in a time where the voices of women were often unheard.

References: [jasna.org/about/](http://jasna.org/about/)