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Austen Power

To mark the 200th anniversary of 'Pride and Prejudice,' novelists, moviemakers and scholars are releasing a flood of new homages to cash in on the bottomless appetite for all things Austen.

By [ALEXANDRA ALTER](#)



"Pride and Prejudice" turns 200 this year, but there's no end in sight to endless parodies, erotic retellings, zombie mashups and otherwise bizarre remakes of Jane Austen's classic. WSJ's Alexandra Alter joins Lunch Break with a look at how the Jane Austen industrial complex is gearing up to cash in.

When Jane Austen received a copy of her newly published novel, "Pride and Prejudice," in January of 1813, she immediately wrote to her sister Cassandra: "I want to tell you that I have got my own darling Child from London."

In the last 200 years, Austen's "darling child" has spawned hundreds of literary offspring, making it one of the most frequently adapted novels in history. The novel, which centers on the rocky romance between the spirited, obstinate protagonist Elizabeth Bennet and the proud, taciturn aristocrat Fitzwilliam Darcy, has been through countless parodies, film, TV, stage and Web adaptations and erotic retellings. It has been reimagined as a comic book, a board book for toddlers, mashed up with zombies and remade as a Bollywood musical. Austen acolytes have published hundreds of literary reboots.

Austen wrote anonymously, and died, unmarried, in her creative prime, leaving just six complete novels behind. But from this narrow canon, a vast industry



Annie Tritt for The Wall Street Journal

Sharon Lathan is surrounded by Jane Austen memorabilia in her Hanford, Calif., home, above.

Photos: All Things Austen



Getty Images

In celebration of the 200th anniversary of 'Pride and Prejudice,' a homage to the illustrious author, Jane Austen.

been deployed by economists and military leaders. Budget-conscious Austen fans can pick up personal finance tips this April with "Jane Austen's Guide to Thrift," a book by two English professors that joins a growing body of Austen-themed advice and self-help books, including guides to romance, manners, cooking and entertaining.

took shape, and today her brand has become more marketable than ever.

Now the field's about to get much more crowded. To mark the 200th anniversary of "Pride and Prejudice" this year, novelists, scholars, biographers and filmmakers are releasing a flood of new homages and critical studies to cash in on the seemingly bottomless appetite for all things Austen. More than a dozen books about the author will hit bookstores in coming months, including a new biography, a book that explores her cult status, two studies of Austen-era England and two books about Austen and economics.

"Pride and Prejudice" alone is currently being reworked in almost every imaginable format: as a novel set in contemporary times by the best-selling novelist Curtis Sittenfeld; as a Lifetime TV series, titled "Darcy's Town"; as a popular Web series called "The Lizzie Bennet Diaries" (the characters have their own Twitter and [Facebook](#) feeds) and as a romantic fantasy movie, written by the late Nora Ephron, based on a British TV series.

"I've wondered if there will be Austen fatigue," says Paula Byrne, whose forthcoming biography, "The Real Jane Austen," re-examines the author's life through the lens of her possessions, including a writing desk, vellum journals and a topaz cross. "I see no sign of it."

Publishers are betting Austen will endure as a perennial moneymaker. Next week, Bloomsbury Press will publish "What Matters in Jane Austen? Twenty Crucial Puzzles Solved," by English professor John Mullan, which explores Austen's characters' attitudes toward money, sex and other touchy subjects. In April, Princeton University Press will release "**Jane Austen: Game Theorist**," a political-science professor's argument that Austen's plots hinge on game theory, a strategic approach to human interactions that has

Several factors have contributed to Austen's remarkable longevity. Like Shakespeare's works, her novels deal with universal themes that resonate with readers across generations and historical epochs: love, money, power and status. Her arch humor and wit, and her storybook endings, give her novels both highbrow



Annie Tritt for The Wall Street Journal

Ms. Lathan has a collection of Jane Austen memorabilia.



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The 50-year-old nurse sold more than 200,000 copies of her eight Austen-style novels.

and lowbrow appeal. Die-hard fans include scholar Cornel West, who has addressed the Jane Austen Society of North America, and "American Idol" singer Kelly Clarkson, who paid some \$244,000 at auction last year for a turquoise-and-gold ring that belonged to Jane Austen.

Her books, which briefly went out of print after her death, have remained in print for more than 180 years. Since her stories have entered the public domain, writers and filmmakers can freely riff on the plots and characters, allowing her tales to reach an ever-wider audience with each iteration. A steady flow of film and TV adaptations—from the 1940 version of "Pride and Prejudice" starring Laurence Olivier, to the beloved 1995 BBC "Pride and Prejudice" miniseries starring Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle, to a 2005 Universal Pictures film with Keira Knightley as Elizabeth—have enthroned Austen as a pop-culture icon. Each major screen adaptation draws fresh readers to the novels, says Christian Purdy, a spokesman for Oxford University Press, which has sold more than 500,000 copies of "Pride and Prejudice" since 1980 and saw significant sales spikes after the BBC and Universal adaptations.

A new crop of movies and TV shows will likely breed the next generation of Austen fans. CBS has acquired a script for a modern remake of "Sense and Sensibility," from "Boardwalk Empire" writer Margaret Nagle. Lifetime is partnering with actress Jennifer Love Hewitt's production company on a contemporary retelling of "Pride and Prejudice." Screenwriter Jerusha Hess and novelist Shannon Hale recently adapted Ms. Hale's novel "Austenland," about a lonely Jane Austen fan who falls in love at an Austen theme park, into an independent film starring Keri Russell. The film, produced by "Twilight" author Stephenie Meyer, was shown at the Sundance Film Festival last week and acquired by [Sony](#) Pictures. It's tentatively scheduled for a late-summer release. One of Ms. Ephron's last projects was a screenplay based on "Lost in Austen," a popular British television series about a current-day Austen fan who magically switches places with heroine Elizabeth Bennet. The film is in development at Sony and is being produced by "American Beauty" director Sam Mendes.

"Austen really is inexhaustible," says Claudia Johnson, a Princeton University English professor and author of the 2012 book "Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures." "Each generation tends to think they have discovered her."

Austen wasn't an overnight success. When she was 21, her father sent one of her early novels, "First Impressions," to a publisher, but the manuscript was returned unread. It was finally published 16 years later, as "Pride and Prejudice." Her family and friends praised it as her greatest work, and it remains her most beloved novel today.

Austen's popularity traces back to the late 1800s, more than half a century after her death in 1817 at age 41. She rose to fame after her nephew released a biography in 1869 of his "dear Aunt Jane," portraying her as a demure, well-mannered lady who was devoted to her family. Some

scholars today suspect the real Jane Austen was much more brash and politically engaged, but there is scant evidence. Her sister, Cassandra, destroyed many of Jane's letters and papers because she felt they were too intimate. Some 160 of her letters remain, but her family members cut out some names and other details to avoid scandal.



Sotheby's

Kelly Clarkson paid about \$244,000 for a ring that once belonged to Jane Austen at a Sotheby's auction last year.

By the late 19th century, Austen developed a cultlike following. The release of her nephew's memoir sparked widespread interest in her life and work, while academics began praising her novels for their technical brilliance. British writer and critic George Saintsbury described Austen-lovers as "Janeites" in his introduction to an 1894 edition of "Pride and Prejudice." "Even then, people were bragging about reading her books hundreds of times," Prof. Johnson says. Doctors even began prescribing her novels to shellshocked soldiers during the World War I.

Today's Janeites have more ways than ever to feed their addiction. They attend Austen conferences, complete with Regency costumes and balls, and make pilgrimages to the English towns of Chawton and Bath, where an Austen-themed tourism industry has sprouted.

The most fanatic Janeites don't just read the novels once and move on to the Brontës. They reread them constantly and devour all the movies and fictional spinoffs.

Meredith Esparza, a 27-year-old music teacher in Wilmington, N.C., started reading Jane Austen when she was 17, and rereads the novels every year. She owns DVDs of three different "Pride and Prejudice" adaptations, as well as films based on "Emma," "Mansfield Park," "Sense and Sensibility," "Northanger Abbey" and "Persuasion," plus a few of the looser adaptations like "Bridget Jones's Diary," "Lost in Austen" and "Bride and Prejudice," the 2004 Bollywood movie.

"Her characters are very accessible, even 200 years later," she says. "We're still finding the same kind of person in the world. We still make the same errors in judgment like Elizabeth, or get a little too proud like Emma."

Austen literary reboots have become a profitable niche industry for publishers. "Death Comes to Pemberley," a 2011 murder-mystery sequel to "Pride and Prejudice" written by best-selling British crime writer P.D. James, sold around 450,000 copies in the U.K. and 550,000 copies in the U.S. Seth Grahame-Smith's gore-drenched 2009 parody "Pride and Prejudice and Zombies" sold more than 1.5 million copies in 27 languages.

HarperFiction has commissioned a series of contemporary remakes of Austen novels, pairing six well-known writers with one of Austen's works. The series, called "The Austen Project," will launch this fall in the U.S. and the U.K. with best-selling novelist Joanna Trollope's retelling of "Sense and Sensibility." Next fall, HarperFiction will release a modern-day version of "Pride and Prejudice" by Ms. Sittenfeld, author of "Prep" and "American Wife." Random House will release it in the U.S.

Louisa Joyner, editorial director of HarperFiction in the U.K., conceived of the project as a series of "conversations" with Austen's works, rather than sequels or knockoffs.

"There is this massive affection and huge respect for Jane Austen," Ms. Joyner said. "She just nails social dynamics in a way we can all relate to."

Other publishers have turned Austen-themed fiction into a lucrative cottage industry. Sourcebooks, an independent publisher outside of Chicago, has released nearly 50 Austen-themed books in the last decade, and sold more than a million copies total. The novels, written by and for Jane Austen fans, often put an erotic twist on Austen's tales.

"At first, I had to convince my colleagues that there are tens of thousands of people like me, who want more Jane Austen," said Sourcebooks editor Deb Werksman, who began acquiring Austen-themed fiction a decade ago. "She only left six novels when she died, and you need more, you can't get enough."

The first Austenesque novel Sourcebooks released, Linda Berdoll's 2004 erotic take on "Pride and Prejudice" titled "Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife," sold more than 350,000 copies. Other top-selling authors include Abigail Reynolds, a psychiatrist in Wisconsin whose 11 Austen-themed books have sold more than 180,000 copies, and Sharon Lathan, a 50-year-old nurse from California's Central Valley, who has sold more than 200,000 copies of her eight Austen-style novels.

Ms. Lathan, who writes "spicy" books that delve into the characters' love lives, says she has been criticized by Jane Austen purists.

"It took a long time for people to realize that we weren't doing something sacrilegious," she said. "We do it because we love her stories so much."

Not everyone's certain that the appetite for Austen is bottomless. Juliette Wells, an associate professor of English at Goucher College in Baltimore and author of "Everybody's Jane: Austen in the Popular Imagination," says she's seeing signs of Jane Austen overload.

"The field is really, really crowded," she said. "The doors are closing on Jane Austen projects."

Even Sourcebooks, the leader in Austenalia, is backing off, with just three titles for 2013.

But for die-hard fans like Sandy Lerner, co-founder of Cisco Systems and founder of Urban Decay cosmetics, there will never be enough. Ms. Lerner discovered Austen in college in the 1980s. She has read "Pride and Prejudice" well over 100 times, and "Persuasion" more than 200 times.

When Cisco went public in 1990, Ms. Lerner used part of her fortune to buy Jane Austen's brother's estate in Chawton, England. She founded a library there and created her own publishing house, Chawton House Press, an imprint dedicated to publishing books about Austen and other 18th- and 19th-century English women writers.

Chawton House's first title, released in 2011, was "Second Impressions," a sequel to "Pride and Prejudice," which follows Elizabeth and Darcy on a trip through Europe 10 years after their wedding. Ms. Lerner, who wrote it under the pen name Ava Farmer, spent 26 years researching the book. But she still feels the weight of her predecessor.

"I tried really hard, but I read some sentence she wrote, and it's so much better than mine, it's crushing," Ms. Lerner said.

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Two Centuries of Austen Worship

The universal themes of love, money, power and status in "Pride and Prejudice" speak to readers across generations, from the prince of England to World War I soldiers to contemporary romance readers. Here are some high points in the novel's history

—Alexandra Alter



Writer Pictures/Associated Press

An illustration of Jane Austen at her writing desk.



Bettmann/Corbis

George Saintsbury



Hulton Archive/Getty Images

British soldiers lined up in a narrow trench during World War I.

1797

Jane Austen's father submits his daughter's manuscript, titled 'First Impressions,' to a publisher, who refuses to even read it.

1813

'First Impressions' is finally published as 'Pride and Prejudice.' Jane is overjoyed and calls the novel her 'darling Child.'

1894

In a new edition of 'Pride and Prejudice,' the writer and critic George Saintsbury gives a name to fanatic Jane Austen followers: 'Janeites.' It sticks, to this day.

1914-18

World War I soldiers read 'Pride and Prejudice' for comfort and distraction; Rudyard Kipling later publishes 'The Janeites,' a short story about a group of soldiers who shared a passion for Jane Austen.

2013

For the 200th anniversary, members of the Jane Austen Society of North America are launching a yearlong celebration: The Chicago chapter will read it aloud on Jan. 28. In July, the Louisville chapter will hold a Regency-style ball and society members will take a 'Pride and Prejudice' tour.

1940

Laurence Olivier and Greer Garson star in the first film adaptation of 'Pride and Prejudice.'

1995

The BBC releases a 'Pride and Prejudice' miniseries starring Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle as Darcy and Elizabeth. In a famous scene, Darcy emerges from a lake in a soaked shirt. The YouTube clip of that scene has been viewed 2.7 million times.



Everett Collection

'Pride and Prejudice' miniseries



Everett Collection

Keira Knightley

2005

A Universal Pictures adaptation of the film, featuring Keira Knightley, grosses more than \$120 million world-wide.

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