



“Delightful.”  
—*People*

# Book Club Guide

Including a letter from author Charlie Lovett, a Q&A with Charlie Lovett, suggested questions for discussion, and additional resources for your book club meeting or personal reflection.

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*Dear Readers,*

It's lovely to have a chance to address you personally and to say a few words about my experience of writing Jane Austen as a fictional character. True, there are lots of other fictional characters in *First Impressions*, and I hope you will come to love Sophie Collingwood, her uncle Bertram, and Richard Mansfield as much as I do. But it's possible you already know Jane, on some level at least, and I'd like to share with you how I came to know her—not as a real person, but as a fictional character.

It's important to understand the difference between the roles a historical figure plays in a nonfiction work and in a novel. If I were writing a biography of Jane Austen I would want to know everything about her. However, in *First Impressions*, I was not writing about the historical Jane Austen; I was creating a character named Jane Austen who lived and worked in the same time and place as the historical Jane Austen. She has a lot in common with that real person, but ultimately I have to remember that she is a character, and her thoughts, words, and actions have to fit not the real world, but the world of my novel.

While I was always mindful of the basic facts of her life, to create my Jane's personality I looked not to her biographies, but to her novels. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Northanger Abbey* all feature prominently in *First Impressions*, so I began by rereading those three books (and I commend them to you). From there I worked backwards. What kind of woman, I asked myself, would write works like these in a time like the late-eighteenth century? My answer is, I hope, apparent in every scene in which Jane appears. I see Jane as intelligent, witty, energetic, quick on her feet, a little irreverent, and quietly revolutionary.

I still don't know what Jane Austen was really like. None of us will ever know what it was like to spend an afternoon in her presence. But to her fictional friend Richard Mansfield, the fictional Jane was a delight, and I like to believe that the real Jane Austen was as well. I certainly hope you will find her so.

*Happy Reading,*  
*Charlie Lovett*

# Q&A with CHARLIE LOVETT author of FIRST IMPRESSIONS

**Q:** Like your first novel, *The Bookman's Tale*, *First Impressions* features a mystery that hinges on an explosive literary secret. What is the appeal of stories that feature revelations that would completely change how beloved literary icons are viewed?

**A:** I've been a book collector for thirty years, and I think every book collector secretly dreams of finding something (be it a book, or a letter, or a diary) that sheds new light on his particular field of interest or perhaps even explodes an age-old preconception about something. The classic example of this, which I explored in *The Bookman's Tale*, is the attempt so many people have made to be the person to prove that Shakespeare's plays were not written by the man from Stratford, but by someone else. I'm particularly proud of items in my own collection (which centers around the life and works of Lewis Carroll) that might rightfully be called "discoveries." Books, letters, newspaper articles, even advertisements, that teach us something new about Carroll and whence he drew his inspiration.

In *First Impressions*, I decided to go a little further and invent a controversy involving Jane Austen. Not working within the framework of a preexisting literary mystery gave me tremendous leeway to create believable artifacts that can be interpreted in different ways—and for most of the book, it's up to the reader to decide exactly what to think of these artifacts.

**Q:** *First Impressions* features two heroines—Jane Austen and Sophie Collingwood— one real and one imagined. What challenges did you face writing about such a well-known and beloved author? How did Sophie first take shape in your mind?

**A:** As I noted above, I first approached writing Jane Austen by rereading her novels, but I did something else as well. I feel a strong connection between place and narrative when I write, so, before I began working on *First Impressions*, I travelled to Steventon, the small village in Hampshire where Jane lived her first twenty-five years and in and around which much of her portion of my novel would be set. Standing in the churchyard where she played as a girl, driving along the narrow lanes down which she may have taken walks, and staring out across views that would have been familiar to her helped to get me grounded in Jane's world. Her first scene is similarly grounded—she walks in the fields near Steventon, goes into the church, and stands under the ancient yew tree by the church, just as I did. By both reading her words and exploring her environment I began to feel like I knew who I wanted Jane to be in my novel.

I knew from the start that Sophie would be something other than a modern Jane Austen, but she began to take shape with some of the same character traits that I saw in Jane. I wrote Sophie's first scene a month or two before I sat down and starting working in earnest on the first draft, and that scene changed a lot as my idea of Sophie evolved. But my first image of her remains—a young woman walking alone and reading a book. I think that image still informs Sophie as she is at the beginning of the novel. Helping her explore everything positive about that image and grow out of anything potentially negative gave me her character arc.

**Q: What was the genesis for this story? How did you prepare to write it?**

**A:** My first twinges about this story actually came from a scene that I cut from my previous novel *The Bookman's Tale*. In the scene, the librarian Francis Leland described how a second edition of a book could, in some cases, be more valuable to scholars than a first. That got me thinking—what if I carried this idea to extremes? What if there were a title that was worthless in its first edition and priceless in its second edition? Why might that be? I actually invented *The Little Book of Allegories* by Richard Mansfield before I knew exactly how it would fit into the story.

The other thing that happened early on in my process was that I had a conversation with my agent in which I told him the basic idea for the novel. He said, “I think your modern hero needs to be a woman,” and everything started to click into place—the parallels between Jane and Sophie and between Richard Mansfield and Sophie's Uncle Bertram. Once those key relationships were established in my mind, I understood what I was writing about and got down to work.

**Q: *First Impressions* imagines Jane Austen before she became a published author. As an author, did you use your own publishing experience to imagine Austen's thoughts and feelings?**

**A:** Not so much my publishing experience, but certainly the creative process as I have experienced it and as other writers have expressed it to me. Jane and I do not work exactly the same way, but I did imbue her creative process with some of my own. For instance, I show her drawing inspiration at times from solo walks in the countryside. I often find a long walk or run will help me to focus my thoughts. I was training for a marathon during the time I was starting to think out the details of *First Impressions*, and when we were in England that autumn I ran almost every day. I always came home and went, sweaty though I was, immediately for pen and paper to write down ideas that had come to me during the run. I also made Jane observant. She doesn't necessarily write about the things she experiences, but she uses those things as a jumping off point and as a way of filling in details. As a writer (and especially when I'm in the middle of a project) I try to notice things—snippets of conversations, details of architecture, tiny events—all of which can be morphed into the kind of details that give a novel life. There is a great example of Jane's doing this later in *First Impressions*, when she is walking with Mr. Mansfield.

**Q: Many mentors appear in *First Impressions*. Sophie and Austen each benefit from the advice and tutelage of a loving friend. Was this a conscious parallel?**

**A:** Absolutely. I really wanted to explore a different kind of love here—not romantic love but, as Jane calls it, a love that is “slower and gentler, more intellectual than passionate.” In both cases a young woman is mentored by a much older man—for Sophie it is her uncle, for Jane the visiting clergyman Richard Mansfield. But I wanted the relationships to be much deeper than just a teacher/student or mentor/mentee connection. Both Sophie and Jane have moments of realization when they begin to understand the extent to which their relationships with these men are shaped by love, and in both cases, I think, those realizations expand the young women's understanding of what love is and what it can do. Love is so much more than passion and romance; it's also much more than what a parent feels for a child and vice versa. I wanted to use these relationships to explore another of what David Garnett called the “Aspects of Love.”

**Q: Several of Austen's novels appear in *First Impressions*. Do you have a favorite?**

**A:** I love them all, but my favorites are *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. They also happen to be the two that feature most prominently in the plot of *First Impressions*. I think one reason these two are so good is that she wrote the original versions when she was very young (in

her early twenties) then returned to them more than a decade later when she was more mature and rewrote them. So they benefit from both youthful exuberance and tempered wisdom. *Northanger Abbey* was written during the same early period of creativity, but not substantially rewritten; the other three novels were written much later. *Emma* and *Persuasion* are the only two that do not enter into the story of *First Impressions*, but that doesn't mean I don't like them. In the early going, I was giving serious thought to basing Sophie on Ann Elliot, the heroine of *Persuasion*.

**A: Like yourself, Sophie loves old books that tell a story. Books almost literally transport her to another place and time. How are books able to so effectively tell stories across the ages?**

**A:** For me there are two elements to this, and I try to get at both of those elements in my novels: there is text and there is the physical book. It's obvious the way in which text tells a story, and if that text is rooted in a particular time and place (like the novels of Jane Austen are rooted in Regency England) they can effectively transport us to that time and place. It is the cheapest and best (so far) form of time travel. But to me, a physical book can add to that transport—especially if the book also comes from that same time and place. The day I finished the first rewrite of *First Impressions* I visited the rare book room at my local university library and read the first couple of chapters of *Pride and Prejudice* from a copy of the first edition. Looking at and feeling the ink and paper that first brought that incredibly familiar text to the world rooted me even more firmly in the time of the novel's first readers. A rare book can exist in many times at once. When I take a hundred- or two-hundred-year-old book off my shelf to read, my eyes are following the same lines and my fingers turning the same pages that have been followed and turned by generations of readers before me. I can connect not just to the origins of the book and its text, but to all those readers and owners who came between the creation of the book and my own enjoying of it.

**A: Sophie's family has a spectacular library—does it at all resemble your own? Through a peculiar arrangement, Sophie's Uncle Bertram is allowed to choose one book from their vast collection every Christmas. If you had access to a similar trove of rare books, is there a particular volume you'd go for first?**

**A:** The biggest differences between the Collingwood library and my own are that mine is very focused and, unlike theirs, mine gets used all the time.

I've visited a lot of "stately homes" in Britain and noticed something. The libraries in the smaller homes (homes where families still occupy most of the house) look like they are used all the time. But in the larger houses (where families either don't live in the main house or only occupy a small part of it) the libraries look untouched. The books sit in neat lines behind locked cabinet doors and one gets the sense they are only removed once a year for dusting. So, I thought, what if a smaller house—a house that was still a family home—had an untouched library. Why might that be? This idea became the crux of the relationship between Sophie, her father, and her Uncle Bertram.

What would I pick first if given free reign over an old British library? Who knows what would be there, but I would be most drawn to literature—an early Shakespeare folio would be nice, or perhaps a first edition of some classic work. Of course, if there was a first edition of *Pride and Prejudice* on the shelf, it would be game, set, and match.

**A: Many characters write letters in *First Impressions*, even the contemporary ones. Do you think letters add something to a story that description and dialogue cannot? Will epistolary novels ever make a comeback?**

**A:** There are two reasons characters write letters in *First Impressions*. First, part of the novel is

about Jane Austen writing the first drafts of *Sense and Sensibility* (which we know was an epistolary novel called *Elinor and Marianne*) and *Pride and Prejudice*, which under original title of *First Impressions*, might have been epistolary. So I really wanted to incorporate letters into my own storytelling in addition to referencing the way Jane Austen wrote in letters early in her career. Also, I believe in letters. I am not THAT old, but I can remember a time when there was no e-mail and long distance phone calls were expensive and letters were one of the ways we communicated with and even wooed one another. I can remember in both high school and college approaching that post office box and getting a thrilling sensation when I saw that telltale envelope that just might mean a letter from a girl. And I still have a lot of those letters. In the same way that physical books can connect us to the past in a way that e-books cannot, real handwritten letters can connect us to a correspondent in a way that e-mail can never hope to do. And along with the idea of letters comes the idea of waiting. I love that. I love a character not being able to find out instantly what she wants to know or how another person is feeling. I tried to get at this when I reimagined Darcy waiting for a letter from Elizabeth Bennett—the almost blissful pain of not knowing is something that is fast disappearing from the world.

Will epistolary novels come back? They've never completely left—I've seen novels of e-mails and even of texts. But if the real art of letter writing is lost (and remember letters used to be—for some correspondents, anyway—much more literary than your average e-mail) then those who want to write epistolary novels will first have to learn how to write letters. Fortunately, there are huge numbers of published letters by writers past (both literary and otherwise) that stand ready to serve as a guide to anyone who wants to revive that noble art.

# Suggested Questions for Discussion



- 1) Have you read *Pride and Prejudice* (or do you want to now)? What similarities do you see between the story of Elizabeth Bennet and that of Sophie Collingwood? Why do you think Sophie is particularly fond of Austen's works?
- 2) What sort of relationship does Sophie have with her sister Victoria? Does it echo in any way the relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and one of her sisters in *Pride and Prejudice*? In what ways is Mr. Collingwood like Mr. Bennet?
- 3) How does the author use the story to explore the creative process?
- 4) *First Impressions* was the working title of *Pride and Prejudice*. Why else do you think it makes an appropriate title for this novel?
- 5) Compare the relationship of Jane and Mr. Mansfield to that of Sophie and Uncle Bertram. Have you had a relationship like this? Jane describes her relationship with Richard as "nothing to do with romance but everything to do with love." What does she mean by that? Have you had a similar relationship?
- 6) Mr. Mansfield says to Jane, "I never meant for you to think that I viewed you as my equal. I am afraid you exceed me by a wide margin in matters of intellect." In what way are Jane and Mr. Mansfield equals? In what ways does each exceed the other?
- 7) Discuss the ways in which the author uses letters in the text. What do they add to the narrative? Why do you think he chose to use them?
- 8) Why do you think the author included scenes in an eighteenth-century print shop? What did these scenes add to the story? Were you surprised by anything you learned in these scenes?
- 9) Sophie and the author have both worked as antiquarian booksellers and are closely connected to books not just as texts but as physical objects. Are physical books still relevant? What, if anything, does a physical book add to its text that a digital book does not?
- 10) Sophie's father is frustrated that he cannot sell the family library—he sees it as a millstone around his neck. Lord Wintringham, on the other hand, finds his family library quite useful. Compare these two libraries and their owners. How does Mr. Collingwood's predicament echo the peril of libraries in general in the 21st century?
- 11) The *Washington Post* called this novel "a love letter to fiction." In what way do you think that is (or is not) true?

# Further Reading

## Further Reading on Jane Austen

*Jane Austen: A Life* by Carol Diggory Shields

*The Real Jane Austen: A Life in Small Things* by Paula Byrne

*Jane Austen: A Life* by Claire Tomalin

*Jane Austen's England: Daily Life in the Georgian and Regency Periods* by Roy and Leslie Adkins

*A Jane Austen Education: How Six Novels Taught Me About Love, Friendship, and Things That Really Matter* by William Deresiewicz

*Jane Austen's Guide to Thrift: An Independent Woman's Advice on Living Within One's Means* by Kathleen Anderson and Susan Jones

*Dear Jane Austen: A Heroine's Guide to Life and Love* by Patrice Hannon

*The Jane Austen Book Club* by Karen Joy Fowler

*Among the Janeites: A Journey Through the World of Jane Austen Fandom* by Deborah Yaffe

*What Matters in Jane Austen?: Twenty Crucial Puzzles Solved* by John Mullan

## Online Resources about Jane Austen and her World

[The Jane Austen Society of North America](#)

[Jane Austen's House Museum](#)

[Chawton House Library](#)

[Jane Austen's History of England](#)

[Regency England 1790-1830](#)

[JaneAusten.org](#)

[Jane Austen Centre](#)

[Jane Austen Addict](#)

[Write Like Jane Austen](#)