

## Summary of July Address

**Guest Speaker: Susannah Fullerton**

**Subject: "Why men should read Jane Austen".**

Whew! We were left in no doubt as to why we should read Jane Austen's books. Susannah's passion for her subject was infectious – I'm not sure whether the phalanx around her at the close of the meeting was due to an awakening of passion for Jane's books or for Susannah herself.

As outlined by Jim Bryant in his introduction, Susannah has sound credentials in matters literary, both professional and practical, having supplemented her BA Uni of Auckland NZ with a post graduate degree in Victorian literature at Uni of Edinburgh UK. She currently teaches literature at the WEA adult education centre and lectures regularly at the State Library, Art Gallery and ADFAS. She leads annual literary tours to the UK and also offers talks on many other famous writers. But her passion for Jane Austen is obviously paramount – President of the Jane Austen Society of Australia, taking her subject to schools, community groups and adult classes, and author of 2 books on Jane Austen. As Jim summed up – "If Jane Austen was around, she would be delighted with Susannah".

Jane was born in Steventon, Hampshire, England in 1775, one of 8 siblings (5 girls) whose father Rev Austen also took in boys to prepare them for University. Although poor and unable to afford school fees for the girls, the household contained good books and Jane became self educated. She began writing in her early teens and it is now considered her works at that age were of such merit she is rated as an early genius. At age 20 a hoped for marriage proposal was unfulfilled, then in her mid twenties she rejected a proposal and she never married. Financially dependent on her father, when he retired to Bath she had no option but to go also, albeit reluctantly.

Her first book sold to a publisher was "*Northanger Abbey*". Following no action, it was retrieved from that publisher and eventually published in 1818 – one year after her death.

After her father's death, she, her mother and her sister went to live with her brother who had inherited property. Preserving her anonymity, her second novel and first book published "*Sense and Sensibility*" in 1811 was attributed to "a lady". The next, "*Pride and Prejudice*" published in 1813 to "the author of *Sense and Sensibility*". This one made 110 pounds – she was never a best seller during her lifetime and only grossed 600 pounds. "*Pride and Prejudice*" is the most popular of her novels, having been transformed into film as well as many sequels. The sequels of her novels number some one thousand plus. The next novel "*Mansfield Park*" published in 1814 was more serious, more controversial with the hero being not handsome as in the others. Susannah considers Jane's next, "*Emma*" published in 1816 to be the perfect novel. Susannah's mother read this one to her as a child when the hero seemed old. Now that she is older than him he seems young. Jane's final novel "*Persuasion*" was written when she was unwell and was published in 1818.

So to the big question – why should we gentlemen read Jane Austen? The reasons according to Susannah -

1. She gives more pleasure to men than any other woman ever.
2. Every sentence is a work of art, having the right word in the right place.
3. She is a most romantic writer. Referring to Captain Wentworth's letter in "*Pride and Prejudice*" Susannah's daughter commented "I wish some man would write to me like that." Mother's response – "Don't hold your breath".
4. Probably the most important aspect of her writing is her understanding of human nature which comes through on every page. As we read, we can all recognise the various types who appear in the novels.

Jane died in Winchester aged 41 (believed to be from Addison's disease, but uncertain) and is buried in the Cathedral. At the time of her writing, the novels of Dickens with severe extremes of good and bad and Elliot were preferred, But towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jane's books gained in popularity which is now a "raging torrent". Jane is the 3<sup>rd</sup> most written about woman in history after Joan of Arc and the Virgin Mary.

Of Susannah's two books about Jane, the first one "*Jane Austen - Antipodean Views*" sought responses from distinguished persons which was most successful, - particularly from men. The second one "*Jane Austen & Crime*" explored the social aspects of crime in Jane's era including attitudes to offences such as adultery and gambling.

The Jane Austen Society is the largest literary society in Australia, meeting regularly in Roseville and having recorded books and special lunches for Jane's birthday in September. The Australian Society does not go to the extent of those overseas which have shocking pink nighties endorsed "Not tonight dear, I'm reading Jane Austen" and "Mr Darcy Soap" to rub yourself all over.

In question time, responding to a comment that men are more romantic than women but can't express, Susannah responded "Read Jane and learn how!" On why Jane always wrote from a woman's perspective, she only wrote about what she knew and as she remained single all her life, that was her sole aspect. Her work is so essentially English it is very hard to translate to other languages.

Jack Mitchell's vote of thanks conveyed to Susannah indications that she had stirred in us a desire to read Jane's works, leading no doubt to us exploring more fully the romantic side of our nature.