

NAXOS  
AudioBooks

Jane Austen  
**Emma**

THE  
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CLASSICS

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Read by **Juliet Stevenson**

CLASSIC  
FICTION



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# Jane Austen

# Emma

Read by **Juliet Stevenson**

Jane Austen herself wrote of her heroine Emma, 'I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like,' and in so doing she set herself an enormous task. However, she accomplished it with such skill that today the work is often regarded as her finest.

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775, the seventh child of the family. At that time, her father was Rector of the Hampshire village of Steventon, near Basingstoke. She became a well-educated young woman: together with her sister Cassandra she was sent to good boarding schools in her early years, before, like Emma herself, continuing her education at home with her father.

Her first novel to reach publication was *Sense and Sensibility*, in 1811, with *Pride and Prejudice* following in 1813 and *Mansfield Park* in 1814. By this time Jane was in her mid thirties, but in fact had already been writing for many years. Her

earliest pieces, written when she was just a girl, were for the amusement and entertainment of her family, and she particularly enjoyed penning burlesques of popular romances. *A History of England by a Partial, Prejudiced and Ignorant Historian* was one of her early, unpublished works and suggests her natural gift for gentle irony. It is thought that an early work entitled *The Watsons*, which Jane wrote as early as 1803, probably provided the basis for *Emma*, which was itself published in December 1815 in spite of bearing the date 1816 on the title page. A more mature woman herself by this time, one of Jane's main themes in *Emma* was that of growing up. Emma is immature at the start of the novel and only reaches maturity by undergoing painful experiences as well as through the guidance of Mr Knightley. The title page of the work also stated that the novel was 'By the author of "Pride and Prejudice"'

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and that it was dedicated to the Prince Regent, later King George IV. This was at his request since, although he was a great admirer of hers, the admiration was not reciprocated. *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were both published in 1818. However, the dates of publication give no clues as to when these novels were actually written, and both were, in fact, published posthumously by Jane's brother Henry who was two years her senior and to whom she was especially close. He was the one to formally reveal her authorship since all four titles published in her lifetime were done so anonymously.

*Emma* was originally structured in the conventional three parts: the first two focussed on Emma's suitors for Harriet, the third described Emma's realisation of her true feelings. This then produced a novel with a distinct beginning, middle and end which roughly correspond to the three volumes of the original publication. We quickly learn that Emma is a spoilt, powerful and interfering young woman. Throughout the story, in order to win readers' sympathy for her, Jane Austen cleverly gives us, as well as narrative dialogue, Emma's limited and often incorrect viewpoint, including an idea of

her thoughts. This frequently leads readers to make the same mistakes in deduction as Emma herself. The novel can, in fact, almost be likened to a detective story since clues are provided for readers and Emma alike, but are easily missed or misinterpreted. It is certainly a novel which invites a second reading: the writer's intentions when including points which, on first reading seem irrelevant, then becoming apparent. In fact the novel is one of economy of narrative and there is always a purpose for what is included: everything written is intended to inform the reader. We learn about the characters mainly from what they themselves say and the way in which they say it, though what is said about them by others also informs us. However, Austen does limit information on their physical appearance.

Austen's style of writing does not really fit in with much of the literature of the period. This was the time of the Romantic movement, in which writing often took on a more personal feel – something particularly apparent in poetry. Works by poets such as Keats, Byron, Coleridge and Shelley often include references to their own feelings, loves and sorrows, whilst highly imaginative and

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dramatic Gothic novels were also becoming fashionable. Consequently Austen received some criticism for the more realistic nature of her writing, although writers such as Macaulay, Coleridge and Sir Walter Scott were full of praise for her work. She does include a reference to the popular wild setting with the Box Hill location, as well as a spoof elopement scene, a play on the then popular Gothic style. Generally, however, this is an anti-romantic work, with a demonstration of how excess and uncontrolled imagination such as Emma's can lead to problems.

Jane Austen herself led a calm and unremarkable life. She was very modest about her gift for writing, describing her work as '...that little bit (two inches wide) of ivory, in which I work with so fine a brush as produces little effect after much labour'. She spent many years living in quiet, rural villages, though she did live for a while in fashionable, elegant Bath after her father retired in 1801. This was something she did not relish and news of the intended move actually caused her to faint. Following her father's death in 1805 Jane also lived in Southampton, until 1809, with her mother and sister. They

then moved to Chawton in Hampshire. It is interesting to note that Jane Austen chooses an adoptive background for Frank Churchill. Like Frank, Jane's own brother Edward, one of six sons, was given for adoption. His adoptive father, a Mr Thomas Knight, was a wealthy but childless distant relative and this wealth enabled Edward to provide the home in Chawton. Edward's dutiful and morally admirable actions could also have provided the inspiration for the gentlemanly behaviour of Mr Knightley.

Chawton's rural setting, where she was to spend the rest of her life, was much more pleasing to Jane, and her writing blossomed from this time. However, much of her life consisted of nothing more exciting than conversation (or, more accurately, gossip), needlework and reading – often aloud, in her own drawing-room or in those of other people. Private dances or balls and occasional visits to fashionable seaside towns would have provided the only real highlights. However, it must be remembered that class distinctions were rigid at this time, and life for the upper class was just as portrayed by Jane Austen, drawing on her own limited experience. Their occupations

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were, indeed, social, with dinner parties and balls considered extremely important, and trivialities such as visiting friends taking up much of their time. Not surprisingly then *Emma*, although seemingly rather superficial in outlook, presents us with a Highbury which is remarkably similar to Jane Austen's own world. Indeed she herself said that, 'Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on.' There are no references to significant events of the time, notably the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, even though, living near the South Coast, invasion might have seemed a possible threat for Jane. However, she never wished to write about something of which she had no first-hand experience in spite of having two brothers in the Navy.

Jane Austen never married although she was reputed to have had several romantic attachments, first to a young man called Tom Lefroy, then in 1802 to a man whom Jane and her sister Cassandra met at the sea-side. Unfortunately the latter died in 1803 before he could propose, although in that same year Jane did receive a proposal of marriage from a wealthy Hampshire landowner. She

accepted his proposal, only to retract it the following morning. Marriage, however, together with Emma's plotting to achieve it for others, forms another main theme in *Emma*. The story begins with the marriage of the Westons, whilst the Eltons' marriage illustrates one which is made for the wrong reasons. The John Knightleys merely tolerate each other, and Miss Bates exemplifies the fate of the spinster. Emma's misinterpretation of evidence regarding relationships concerning Mr Elton, Harriet Smith, Frank Churchill, Jane Fairfax and Mr Dixon, together with her blindness with regard to her own feelings for Mr Knightley, not only provide us with the bulk of the plot but also with much comedy.

By 1816 Jane Austen had become seriously ill and *Persuasion* was written whilst her health was rapidly failing. In May of that year she visited Cheltenham with her sister Cassandra. The spa waters there offered little relief and in May 1817 she was taken to Winchester to be under the care of the best doctors. However, within two months of arriving there she died, on July 18th, at the age of 42. Not until the twentieth century did her works become established favourites when,

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according to some critics, her admirers were over-lavish in their praise. Nevertheless many today are of the opinion that *Emma* is not only Jane Austen's most accomplished work but also one of the greatest of all English novels.

**Notes by Helen Davies**

Cover picture:  
Catalani, Angelica; Italian singer by Elizabeth-Louise Vigée-le-Brun  
courtesy AKG Images

# Jane Austen

# Emma

Read by **Juliet Stevenson**

Arrogant, self-willed and egotistical, Emma is Jane Austen's most unusual heroine. Her interfering ways and inveterate matchmaking are at once shocking and comic. She is 'handsome, clever and rich' and has 'a disposition to think too well of herself'. When she decides to introduce the humble Harriet Smith to the delights of genteel society and to find her a suitable husband, she precipitates herself and her immediate circle into a web of misunderstanding and intrigue, from which no-one emerges unchanged.

Juliet Stevenson, an incomparable reader, is for many the voice of Jane Austen.

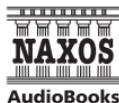


**Juliet Stevenson** has worked extensively for the RSC and the Royal National Theatre. She received an Olivier Award for her role in *Death and the Maiden* at the Royal Court, and a number of other awards for her work in the film *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. Other film credits include *The Trial*, *Drowning by Numbers* and *Emma*. She has recorded *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *To The Lighthouse*, *Persuasion*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park* and *Hedda Gabler* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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