

First Impressions: Jane Austen Undercover

Jane Austen Cover to Cover: 200 Years of Classic Covers.

By Margaret C. Sullivan.

Quirk Books, 2014. 224 pages. Numerous illustrations.

Hardcover. \$24.95.

Review by William B. Parrill.

Jane Austen Cover to Cover gives visual evidence, if indeed any was needed, of the constantly growing popularity of Jane Austen's novels over the past two-hundred years. The volume lavishly illustrates, in color no less, both books with paper jackets—the majority—and those with cloth bindings. The result is a perfect gift book for any Janeite either to give or to receive.

While the reputations of all writers tend to ebb and flow in both popularity and critical approval, the greatest writers, after a period of testing, are accepted into the canon. While this does not mean that the acceptance is accomplished without a grump or two—after all, there is always a negative case to be made—the writer is eventually welcomed into the culture.

Although a great writer may be accepted without being widely read—Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* is hardly a best seller, even today—a favored few may eventually be accepted as both popular and critical favorites. Jane Austen is such a writer. The popularity of the 1995 mini-series of *Pride and Prejudice*, despite its magnificence, was hardly necessary for the continuing rise of Jane Austen's reputation during the twentieth century.

That rise is vividly illustrated in *Jane Austen Cover to Cover: 200 Years of Classic Covers*. Author Margaret Sullivan shows the covers of the early British editions of the novels and comments on them, before progressing to the British and American editions published during the nineteenth century and to the many hardcover and paperback editions published worldwide during the

twentieth. The commentaries which appear before and after the illustrations are adapted from her book *The Jane Austen Handbook*.

Like Charles Dickens, Jane Austen invites illustrators. Unlike “real” painters, the illustrator is, at least to some extent, a servant of the text. His or her function is to give a visual representation. He is both a servant and a master. That is, he has to please both the imagined reader and, if he has any integrity, himself. The perfect illustrator will do both, but there are precious few of those around. John Tenniel's *Alice in Wonderland* is perhaps the most famous, but one or two of the illustrators of Dickens come close.

The search for the perfect illustrations for the covers of Jane Austen's novels is covered historically and visually in *Jane Austen Cover to Cover*. The result is often sobering. My particular favorite is the Signet Classic *Two Gothic Classics by Women*, which helpfully teams together Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* and *Northanger Abbey*, intensified by a reproduction of Fuseli's *Nightmare* showing a sprawled sleeping woman being attacked by a demon. It would be worth real money to know what Jane Austen would think of that.

As we might expect, actors from film and television versions take pride of place on recent covers. Grosset and Dunlap went with Laurence Olivier, the reigning Prince of Hauteur, and Greer Garson, the Princess of Nice. The Penguin Modern Library settled for Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle in a woodland setting with darkness coming on. Penguin Books went with Keira Knightley, apparently pleased at the arrival of Matthew Macfadyen, who is shown suitably disheveled from the rain in the background. These are familiar to us. What is not familiar are the foreign covers. I particularly admired a Spanish version which shows Mr. Darcy's hat surrounded by the heads of admiring women. Another Spanish version is a fairly close copy of a *Gone with the Wind* poster showing Rhett and Scarlett.



Of the foreign renderings of titles, my favorite is the French *Le Coeur et la Raison*, which suggests an eighteenth-century background which would—to my mind properly—remove the novel from the romantic interpretation popular today with many readers. Alas, the cover illustration is more appropriate for a Georgette Heyer novel than for Jane Austen.

A 2010 Japanese version of *Pride and Prejudice*, entitled *Shinchosha*, shows a dark lady with a neat hair bun and what the author delicately calls “a bit of décolletage.” The title, we are told, is written in kanji and represents “a positive connotation... which is good news for Team Darcy,” if indeed any of the members of the team have been worried about him.

The volume also contains helpful advice about collecting. According to the author, a serious collector should ask herself if the price is fair and if she can afford it. She should subscribe to book catalogues in order to keep up with the current market. A library of foreign translations and Jane Austen continuations and sequels should appreciate nicely over the long haul. And even if they don't, they will continue to give pleasure to the owners. This is sound advice, as is the admonition for all Janeites to go out and buy of copy of the book for themselves and another for their favorite Janeite.

William Parrill is Professor Emeritus of English from Southeastern Louisiana University and the author of European Silent Films on Video, Ridley Scott on Film, and other titles.