

Jane Austen

behind bars

Teaching the humanities
to increase humanity

BY MOLLY LAW, M.A.

*"But people themselves alter so much,
that there is something new to be
observed in them forever."*

— Elizabeth Bennet in "Pride and Prejudice."



I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies, do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can.

— Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

Jane Austen has made new friends in the most unlikely of places, as is her nature. However, it came as quite a surprise to Devoney Looser, Arizona State University's (ASU) Foundation Professor of English and author of "The Making of Jane Austen," as she entered Florence State Prison in Florence, Arizona. According to The State Press, "Devoney Looser said she was nervous and didn't know what to expect from her newest pupils: a group of men imprisoned for sexual offenses. But what Looser said she found was a classroom of men eager to learn about the writings of 18th-century writer Jane Austen." Austen has always had an uncanny ability to find a place amongst the modern reader, no matter who or where they are. Her writings hold a transcendent power to entertain as well as to educate readers not only on society, but on their own personal lives. Iseult Gillespie, in the TED-Ed presentation, "An Animated Lesson on Jane Austen," describes Austen's special effect on her readers, "It is even been said that some readers feel like the author's secret confidant, trading letters with their delightfully wicked friend, Jane." Austen's works also offer a beautiful and authoritative blend of individuality and societal responsibility. This unique combination in a prison educational program provides offenders with the ability to learn, imagine and critique their own lives and behaviors, and evaluate how that will ultimately affect the society in which they will eventually return.

"Investigate and learn to name those mixed and complex feelings that arise out of genuine response to common feelings of common life. Such feelings aren't overly dramatic or go by exaggerated names, to name them and know them is to cultivate a mature understanding of human nature."

According to Lorraine Murphy, associate professor of English at Hillsdale College, this is Austen's underlining message to her readers and fellow writers in the novel "Northanger Abbey." Austen wrote during the highly popular age of gothic and romantic novels. While entertaining, Austen believed they did very little to convey real-life situations, and they often created unrealistic expectations for the reader. According to Murphy, Austen presented fiction as a reminder that "there is a proper relationship between fiction and life ..." that it is "most valuable when it deepens our fascination with the reading of real life." However, Austen's belief for the much-needed pragmatism in fiction did not diminish the entertaining

and, at times, audacious characters, plots and themes that have "kept Austen prominent on stage and screen and have made her work easily adaptable for modern sensibility," Gillespie said. According to Elizabeth Langland in "Society and the Novel," "Austen keeps her characters' conflicts with their social milieu within a comic framework, not by presenting a benign picture of society, but by including narrative summaries that stress those aspects of behavior and conventions that assure us society will not stand in the way of individual fulfillment." With the established acceptance of Austen's literary and cultural power, from her novels' first conception to now, Looser was able to explore the possibility of Austen being accepted in prison.

"We often celebrate humanities education as a way to help students see their lives reflected in stories, in order to deepen their understandings of themselves in historical and cultural contexts."

— Devoney Looser
in "Salon"

Societal expectations

It has been a long-held view that crime and punishment alleviates the burden on society, which was a "truth universally acknowledged" when offenders first enter prison upon sentencing, but it is often forgotten that 95% of offenders [in state prisons] will eventually exit, according to the Bureau of Justice, and the majority of the time they exit the same way they entered. According to the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), "Returning to the community from jail or prison is a complex transition for most offenders, as well as for their families and communities. Upon reentering society, former offenders are likely to

I always deserve the best treatment because I never put up with any other.

— Jane Austen, *Emma*

struggle with substance abuse, lack of adequate education and job skills, limited housing options and mental health issues.” The Prison Policy Initiative reported that more than half of former offenders only have a high school diploma or GED and a quarter have no accreditation at all, which accounts for the 27% unemployment rate amongst the formerly incarcerated population, contributing to the 46.3% of federal offenders rearrested over an eight-year follow-up period, according to the United States Sentencing Commission.

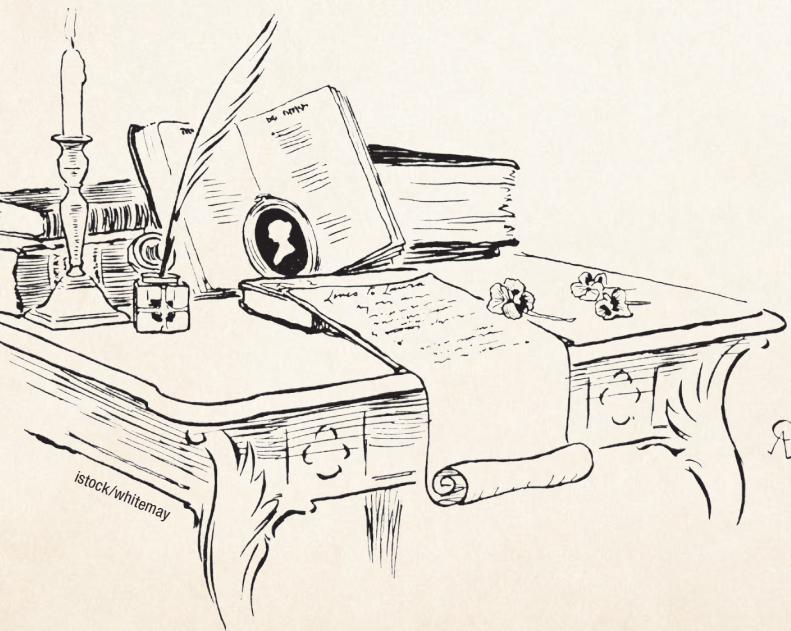
Of course, the partial use of Austen’s infamous, satirical opening line in “*Pride and Prejudice*,” where she exaggerates the 18th-century institution of marriage that “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a fortune must be in want of a wife,” coincides with past societal expectations on crime and punishment: that an offender will reenter society better than he returned by simply “doing the time.” Austen continues, “However little known are the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.” This is just one example of Austen’s many objectives found in her novels for the revitalization of society that parallels individual possibility. According to Langland, “Austen’s protagonists not only free themselves from society’s limitations but shape a society congenial to themselves.” Modern sensibilities are slowly changing, and the rising

sentiment is that offenders should enter society better than they left, especially with current recidivism rates being what they are. However, evidence-based practices reveal that without the proper education and tools this is highly improbable. According to Cornelia Wells, the director of ASU’s Prison Education Programming and senior lecturer of English, “The lack of education among most prisoners is the reason why many of them may enter prison in the first place. Prison education can help correct that systematic problem.”

**“Because in Jane Austen,
there’s always something
new to be revealed.
Which is her superpower.”**

— Laurie Viera Rigler
in the Jane Austen Addict Series.

The program that first introduced Austen to the male inmates at Florence State Prison, according to The State Press, “hosts a variety of courses for ASU students to learn about incarceration and its intersection with literature, and it helps develop and support a network of initiatives connecting ASU students and faculty to education efforts within prisons across Arizona.” Wells said that “part of the purpose of the program is to take a more human-centric approach within the criminal justice system and help reduce the likelihood of repeat offenders.” The RAND Corporation confirms that “prisoners who receive any sort of education are up to 43% less likely to reoffend and return to prison.” Educators know that education is not only a need, but it is also something to be desired. Joe Lockard, the program’s founder and associate English professor at ASU, said in The State Press, “Prisoners are engaged in the life of the imagination, just like the rest of us ... They’re just as human.” Looser saw this firsthand as she realized that these students were not only listening to her and to one another but “they were listening.”



Austen as a fellow inmate

Austen's novels have been established as popular lesson plans for high school English classes, undergraduate courses and postgraduate degrees, yet the establishment of these lessons had not found their way into a prison classroom. Teaching the humanities in a prison education program is not unheard of; Shakespeare, for example, has always been a tried and true literary choice. According to Looser, "Shakespeare's plays have traditionally been imagined as a better fit, especially his histories of tragedies, with their troubling acts of violence and complex social machinations." As she was invited as a guest speaker to Florence State Prison in June 2018 by the Prison Education Programming at ASU's Department of English, Looser said to The State Press that "the works [of Austen] can teach readers about social structures, hierarchies, economics and gender relations. I think all those things that make Austen successful in the regular classroom have a lot to offer in the prison classroom too."

Initially, both Looser and the inmates questioned how Austen could be relevant to them. One inmate asked Looser, "Are these books really meant for men?" Looser told them that only a century ago, Austen's works were celebrated in elite private men's clubs, while, at the same time, "her name was marched through the streets on a suffragist banner." Deidre Lynch, English Lecturer at the University of Toronto remarks, "One curious thing is that 100 years ago Austen was read mostly by men. Now it's a woman's thing because of the way the films have been marketed." In Austen's own time, Tom Lefroy noted that contemporary male readers "were surprised that such a clever book could have been written by a woman." Yet Looser found that these male inmates asked the same questions as her undergraduate students and wanted to know more of Austen's life, career, literary status and politics.

"The students also identified similarities between Austen's world and their own." Looser added, "I strongly believe that reading, and Austen in particular, may inspire readers to



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Just Jane

Jane Austen (December 16, 1775 – July 18, 1817) is one of the world's most influential, studied and beloved authors. Known for her six major novels, "Sense and Sensibility" (1811), "Pride and Prejudice" (1813), "Mansfield Park" (1814), "Emma" (1816), "Northanger Abbey" (1818) and "Persuasion" (1818), Austen wrote of the hardships women experienced within the British landed gentry at the end of the 18th century, specifically the requisite dependence on marriage in the pursuit of accepted social standing and economic security. "Northanger Abbey" and "Persuasion" were both published posthumously. Austen began another novel, eventually titled "Sanditon," but died before its completion. She also left behind three volumes of juvenile writings in manuscript, a short epistolary novel "Lady Susan" and another unfinished novel, "The Watsons." Jane Austen died never guessing the extent of her posthumous success. She received little for her works and was not widely appreciated. However, in the modern age, she is esteemed as one of the greatest authors of all time.

— The Jane Austen Centre

There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the

ask how to live a meaningful life in a world that's often deeply unfair." Looser began to connect the dots between the 18th-century female writer and 21st-century male offenders. One inmate, who read "Sense and Sensibility" in preparation for Looser's class, along with it being the only Austen novel the prison library possessed, compared societal hierarchies in the dysfunctional Dashwood family to those in Florence State Prison. For this inmate, Austen's Mrs. Dashwood and her three daughters were prisoners themselves when transferring from her late husband's responsibility to her eldest son's. "The Dashwood women had become classed as 'not one of them,' going from insiders to outsiders." Looser continued, "Similar things happened among groups of men in a prison hierarchy, he [the inmate] said. It was an astute interpretation of powerful, unfair social structures. I'd never considered the opening of that novel as stratified like a prison yard. Thanks to this student, I'll never be able to read it the same way again."

The interpretation this inmate gleaned from Austen's novel reinforces Amanda Vickery's keen observation in *The Guardian* that "each generation have looked for

their own reflection in the novels, admiring and rejecting, cutting and pasting as fashion demands." And according to Professor Kathryn Sutherland in "Jane Austen: Social Realism and the Novel," "Austen used fiction to describe social reality within her own time and class (the gentry and professional classes of southern England in the early 19th century). By doing so, she was able to introduce something closer to real morality in describing the range of human relationships that we all are likely to encounter in ordinary life." Several inmates, according to Looser, found learning the works of Austen very appealing because they were able to reconnect with their daughters who learn and like Austen. "Nor before entering that classroom, had I considered that some of them might have daughters with whom they'd want to discuss great books."

Looser observed that her students "formed a very diverse group, in terms of age, race and educational background." She found that the inmates' time in the classroom was a novelty for them as they were able to escape the monotony of their daily schedules. She saw the anticipation as some came in with folders that held



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will of others. My courage always rises at every attempt to intimidate me.

— Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

photocopied pages of the selections of Austen she had chosen for them. Looser said that they talked about a few selections from Austen's works, including the first few pages from "Pride and Prejudice," which interplayed with the inmates' personal lives. "Her [Austen] heroines in particular discover in the course of the novel that individual happiness cannot exist separately from our responsibilities to others," according to Sutherland. Looser saw this reflected in their questions as one inmate asked her to name Austen's six novels in order and wrote them down. Looser said, "Another asked me to repeat what I'd said about the first lines of 'Pride and Prejudice' being among the most famous in all of literature. Yet another asked if her novels had happy endings or sad endings that made you think."

"Austen matters and will continue to matter for centuries because she writes honestly, and people will always find the truth about themselves, their acquaintances and their situations in her pages."

— Gracelyn Anderson

"Jane Austen's Life and Impact on Society"

As her students became more intrigued, Looser was surprised at how much they wanted to learn, how they wanted to delve deeper into Austen's world with the footnotes and endnotes indicated within the readings. She said, "I'm so sorry not to have copied those pages for you, but I had no idea how interested you guys would be in endnotes — how much you'd dig endnotes. Most of my ASU students couldn't care less about footnotes or endnotes!" A student replied, "That's because they all have cell phones, and guys in prison don't. We have footnotes." We laughed together at that. But the fact is they had very few things of any kind to consult. There

were precious few books or materials to read at all." Any source of education provides the opportunity for personal growth, enkindling a sense of progress and success that is ultimately needed for the incarcerated population as they reenter society. Yet there was something unique about Austen that day at Florence State Prison. Looser said, "I believe there is value in having male prisoners, in what are virtually male-only environments, discuss stories from the perspective of intelligent, educated and disempowered women, living with codified strictures and unfair structures that limit their growth ... the imaginative possibility for positive second chances."

An unlikely friendship

Education has the power to remove social limitations that may have been set for an individual a long time ago, and there remains the possibility, which Austen reveals, to create more than those previous circumstances would otherwise suggest. Langland confirms that "Austen's novels are not finally about society and social limitation. They are about individual possibility. In her novels, what society needs is also what individuals need." Prison education has the potential to offer offenders an equal chance for a future that breaks the cycle that they have too long been in. "At the same time," Looser said. "I believe that quality educational opportunities should be available to anyone who seeks them, even those who've done reprehensible things. Those factors together made teaching Austen to sex offenders incredibly difficult and deeply moving." Austen did something completely new with the novel when she started writing, and she continues to do something new with anyone she happens to meet. Looser discovered that an 18th-century clergyman's daughter spoke directly to 21st-century male inmates through her relatable characters, who maintain human relationships, encounter conflicts and experience personal achievements that evoke daily life. With Austen's surprising success at Florence State Prison, it is likely Austen will find a continuing place in other prison educational programs. As Gillespie aptly put, "So, hopefully new readers will continue to find a friend in Miss Austen for many years to come."

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