

For the Young Reader Open to “Improvement”

Jane Austen for Beginners

By Robert G. Dryden

For Beginners (an imprint of Steerforth Press), 2012. 170 pages.

B/W illustrations by Joe Lee.

Paperback \$16.99.

Review by Laurie Kaplan.

Attention Janeites: this is NOT a book for YOU. Rather, you might like to present *Jane Austen for Beginners* to your teenaged children, to your “neices” (as Austen writes) and nephews, to your grandchildren—to any young person starting to read beyond the syllabus. The intended audience for this slim volume might very well be readers of about Catherine Morland’s age and experience (“She never could learn or understand any thing before she was taught”). From even a superficial dip into this book, a beginner open to “improvement” will be able to appreciate that there’s more to our favorite author’s novels than the ordinary girl-meets-boy plot (about which some teenagers might say “Yuk”).

Robert Dryden’s *Jane Austen for Beginners*, part of the “For Beginners and Beginners Documentary Comic Books” series, provides a light, bright, and sparkling introduction to Austen’s novels and to the social context of the early nineteenth-century world. Illustrated with lots of wacky cartoons seemingly intended to divert the recalcitrant, the book is designed to acquaint inquisitive young readers with reasons why Austen is considered a great writer. The value of this book is reflected in the fact that Professor Dryden provides just enough material to help, not to overwhelm, a budding Janeite who is trying to sort out such problems as why Austen’s heroines try so hard to get married (social position, a house of one’s own, a modicum of freedom), and what her young men gain from a naval career (ships, travel, the spoils of war, advancement). Dryden outlines Austen’s ideas about snobbery

and “social pedigree,” rank and merit, money and intelligence. He shows what every teenager knows: that first impressions are misleading, that ideas about money and merit are always changing, and that manners and morals make the man—and the woman.

The overall plan of the book is user-friendly. Dryden provides a brief chronological sketch focusing on the Austen family background, the Austens’ place in the social hierarchy, and Jane and Cassandra’s intensely close relationship. Following this bio are succinct summaries of all the novels along with jargon-free analyses of the big issues and moral concerns shaping each plot. The charm of Dryden’s analyses rests in the way he shows how Austen’s issues are reflected in the concerns of young people today. Some of Austen’s characters—materialistic, greedy, and unkind—“behave badly and defy their own hearts;” others “struggle to do the right thing.” Successful marriages, like that of Captain Wentworth and Anne Elliot, are indicative of “a new kind of marriage that is based on love and partnership rather than status and finances,” Dryden concludes at the end of his chapter on *Persuasion*.

Dryden never talks down to his audience. In a section on property laws, he addresses such difficult topics as the entail and primogeniture, all the while clarifying the economic agenda that shapes characters’ decisions. Interspersing contemporary slanginess with a vocabulary that will make some beginners stretch, he describes Mr. Woodhouse as “a card-carrying hypochondriac” who is “allergic to change.” Always attentive to the needs of a variety of readers, he selects facts and details that would appeal to young people who want to become careful readers. It’s a plus that the large, fanciful cartoons show as many young men as young women—mainly behaving badly. Lydia and Wickham eloping on a big-eyed, toothy, rather knowing horse is particularly amusing.

I do have a couple of quibbles about certain infelicities in the text. There are some misspellings: Bennet and Knightley may have suffered

from over-enthusiastic use of spellchecking (the publisher has indicated that mistakes will be corrected in the next edition). A couple of factual (well, fictional) errors crop up: Fanny Harville died before she and Captain Benwick could marry, and Fanny Price is the second eldest child (not the second eldest daughter). But the book furnishes so many insights into such humanistic concerns as moral or noble action, character development, and regard for others that my quibbles dissipate. Perhaps we have to remember that Jane Austen’s spelling was not particularly impeccable, and that pictures of perfection made her sick and wicked.

Jane Austen for Beginners would make a good birthday or graduation present for a “noisy and wild” young person like Catherine Morland, or for a teenager who, like Catherine at seventeen, has an “inclination for finery” and is in training to become a hero/heroine. The final chapter asserts that we continue to read and reread an author who has been dead for 200 years because the novels “are smart, funny, challenging, and useful,” and because Jane Austen “excites imaginations.” Dryden agrees with Amanda Price’s proclamation in *Lost in Austen*: “I love the story. I love Elizabeth. I love the manners and the language and the courtesy. It’s been part of who I am and what I want.”

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