

Lessons for Living

A Jane Austen Education: How Six Novels Taught Me about Love, Friendship, and the things that really Matter.

By William Deresiewicz.

The Penguin Press, 2011. 255 pages.

Hardcover. \$25.95.

Review by William Reeves.

This delightful book about Jane Austen's impact on one man has proven relevant to many readers. I could see the same cast of delinquencies in my own life. The author, William Deresiewicz, shows how the social values of Austen can help men. Permit me to add, since Austen's lessons in living cross sexual boundaries, the book is equally valuable to women.

The author organizes his book clearly by presenting each of the six novels in a separate chapter. The seventh chapter takes us to end of his story—marriage, what else? Each chapter gives the central “how-to-live” message from the novel. The author is anxious that you realize he is not writing a summary of the novels. Indeed, you will miss discussions of many details from the novels. In brief, each of his first six chapters is the author's “take” on one Jane Austen novel.

When Deresiewicz spoke recently at a men's club in New Orleans, he stressed that *Emma* first made him take notice of Jane. The first questioner from the audience said the same, it was *Emma* that first set him off. When Deresiewicz was a twenty-five-year-old rebel—disagreeable, arrogant, and insufferable—a professor forced him to read *Emma*. Although he may have been obnoxious at that time, Deresiewicz today is the nicest former English professor you can find, modest, agreeable, and charming. Jane has had a remarkable impact. Since my own taste began with *Pride and Prejudice*, I was pleased to see another way to start Jane.

Emma's message for the author was that little things matter, such as Miss Bates' incessant droning on matters, not

just because of the humor, but because eventually we see that we must empathize with her. She can't just be ignored. The curve of Emma's experiences in her twenty-first year brought crashing down on her the reality that happiness means appreciating the Miss Bateses of your life. The reader, caught in Emma's web, eventually realizes the similarities of his attitudes to Emma's, and the necessity for a similar correction.

Chapter Two is rather different. If Emma is stuck up, Elizabeth Bennet is a dream. Everything she does and says is right. The author notes that halfway through *Pride and Prejudice*, he was “head over heels for Elizabeth.” But again, Austen entraps the reader. The plot suddenly changes. We realize with Elizabeth that the world is more complicated than we thought when we were young. She never knew herself. Deresiewicz sees this novel as demonstrating a problem in growing up.

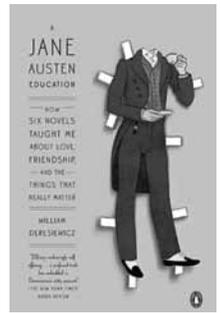
The most surprising chapter is about Deresiewicz' understanding of Anne Elliot's predicament. Suffocated by family and bereft of friends, where was she to go? Her one friend had already let her down. Her love was lost. What would guide her to happiness? It was the discovery of friends. First, she discovered the joys of a group of friends in the happy interactions of Captain Wentworth's fellow officers. The author recounts, “I realized that this, and nothing else, was Austen's image of community—this group of friends.” Then, her old school friend Mrs. Smith re-appeared, with information and advice. *Persuasion*, Jane's last completed novel, was a step out of the nexus of family that overarches the other novels. Here family was enmity, friends amity.

Ultimately, the last best thing Jane Austen has to offer men is help in developing an awareness of their own feelings. These are powerful tools in the hands of women. Men all too often ignore them. As Elizabeth Bennet was evaluating Mr. Darcy, she was consulting her feelings. Growing up subsumes falling in love. Of

the two basic ways, instant passion and gradual awakening, Elizabeth, who tried both, finally tilted to the latter. Of Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth realized: “She respected, she esteemed, she was grateful to him, she felt a real interest in his welfare; and she only wanted to know how far she wished that welfare to depend upon herself, and how far it would be for the happiness of both that she should employ the power, which her fancy told her she still possessed, of bringing on the renewal of his addresses.”

Elizabeth wanted to know her own wishes, her own feelings. This was not just rational calculation. Deresiewicz emphasizes Austen's use of reason as the tool for growing up. Reason is certainly the central element of Austen's classic age. In *Northanger Abbey*, Deresiewicz sees Jane teaching “learning to learn.” But, the learning is rational, almost anti-sentimental. Once upon a time, men thought Austen was a sentimentalist. Men then called her a classic rationalist. It's time to look inward again and see the powerful role feelings play in Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, and Anne Elliot.

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