

## Hardcover: UK

## Why we can't stop reading Jane Austen

Virginia Woolf, Martin Amis, Harold Bloom and other writers examine the lasting appeal of the author of 'Pride and Prejudice' in this collection of critical articles

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

It's at least arguable that central to the novels of Jane Austen is status anxiety. The concept usually seeks to explain why people buy the most expensive houses, cars or concert tickets when often these items at half the price are just as good. It's not the house, car or concert they're really interested in, but displaying what economic class they belong to. Crucial to the syndrome is that if you're really confident of your worth you won't bother with such things. You only do it if fundamentally you feel somehow insecure — often the only person around to be impressed by your behavior is you yourself.

This mode of living used to be called "conspicuous consumption," but in the case of Jane Austen the situation is slightly different. Here the issue is that she belonged to a middling social class — not poor, but by no means very rich. A large majority of English classic writers came from a similar background, but in Jane Austen's case her social position — or so the argument goes — became the mainspring of her work. All the girls of marriageable age who are at the center of her novels — with one possible exception — belong to this class. Success is judged by how they manage to marry men with a respectable, or better, amount of money without compromising their creator's ideas of integrity and pureness of heart.

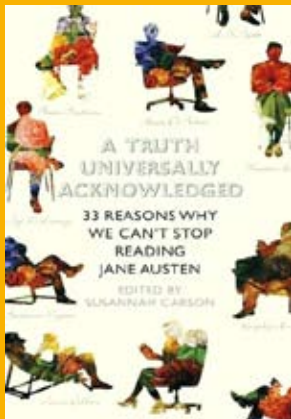
This is most happily achieved by Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*, the author's first major success. She manages to marry a minor aristocrat while at the same time preserving her witty skepticism and general joie de vivre, qualities she very much shares with the author herself.

But Jane Austen doesn't make things as easy for her subsequent heroines. Emma Woodhouse in *Emma* is deliberately made a less attractive figure, Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* is possibly the author's attempt at looking at what happens when a girl with almost no money is placed in a similar situation to that of her other heroines, and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* is getting on in years and is forced to re-evaluate issues of romantic love versus economic self-interest.

*A Truth Universally Acknowledged* is a smart piece of publishing by Particular Books (a division of Penguin). It looks as if it's going to be 33 literary luminaries saying why they love the great writer, but in actuality it's a collection of critical articles that in some cases go back 70 years. It's more like, in other words, an academic compilation put together for the benefit of students, but it's being marketed as a popular book aimed at the general reader. Looked at either way, however, it makes for compulsive reading.

The malaise of status anxiety, it can be argued, particularly afflicts the middle classes. The truly rich don't need to display their wealth because it's obvious to all, whereas the poor have no hope of competing in the status stakes, so for the most part don't bother to try. But for Jane Austen and her heroines it's crucial. What makes her so fascinating, and generally so admirable, indeed for many readers lovable, is that she refuses to acquiesce to the naked demands of class and social betterment. To get her approval, her characters must display the virtues of honesty, compassion and goodness of heart, while at the same time not neglecting their duty to assist their family by making a "good marriage." Endless gradations on this difficult problem of balance,

## PUBLICATION NOTES



A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY  
ACKNOWLEDGED: 33 REASONS WHY  
WE CAN'T STOP READING JANE AUSTEN

EDITED BY SUSANNAH CARSON  
PARTICULAR BOOKS  
295 PAGES

from outright failures to narrow misses, can be observed in the author's six major novels.

A contribution to this book that pinpoints the issue comes from the US novelist Louis Auchincloss. What constitutes the good life to Jane Austen? he asks. It should avoid the worldliness of the rich, he posits, and the crowdedness that accompanies poverty. Good taste, simple elegance, compatibility as well as love in marriage, enough money without coveting it, these constitute the golden mean.

For the rest, there are many amusing and witty contributions here in Jane Austen's own style. One of these comes from the UK novelist Fay Weldon who actually wrote an excellent book on her novel-writing predecessor in letterform, a form Austen herself considered but abandoned as being too old-fashioned. Weldon's chapter is in fact an extract from her own longer book, as are not a few of the other contributions — notably that of the great US critic Harold Bloom.

Among the more modern contributors are Jay McInerney, Martin Amis and Alain de Botton, among the older, Virginia Woolf and Somerset Maugham. There's a classic essay by C.S. Lewis, but he characteristically blots his copybook with a barbed chauvinistic remark — that the concept of "mattering" is "so necessary even to the humblest women."

The eminent Jane Austen scholar Brian Southam contributes an affectionate chapter where he remembers being shown, and allowed to copy, some of the author's manuscript juvenilia in an old house in Kent, manuscripts to which his eminent predecessor R.W. Chapman had been denied access. It was Southam who, in the *Times Literary Supplement* of Feb. 17, 1995, effectively debunked fashionable claims that *Mansfield Park* was seriously concerned with issues of the slave trade, an approach from which the 1998 film of that novel, starring among others Harold Pinter, was not immune.

It's hardly surprising that Jane Austen remains as popular as she is — especially in the UK, where the overwhelming majority of the population is said to consider itself middle class. Her readers are able to console themselves with her novels, and consider that their failure to enter the ranks of the truly rich is because they've remained true to the virtues the author held necessary for genuine self-respect. Whether this is in fact always, or even often, the case is, of course, very much another matter.

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Like Bilbo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings*, Deutsche Grammophon is celebrating its 111th birthday. The company claims it's a significant statistic because Beethoven's final piano sonata was his Opus 111. It sounds more like a PR man's bright idea to me, but the box of 13 DVDs they have come up with is superb value nevertheless, even though all the recordings have long been available separately. At just over US\$70 for 22 hours of music and spectacle, it will prove hard to resist.

I watched four of the performances — Furtwangler conducting *Don Giovanni* in 1954, Fonteyn and Nureyev dancing *Swan Lake* in 1966, Bernstein recording *West Side Story* in 1985, and Nettebko and Villazon singing *La Traviata* in 2005.

The Furtwangler is of great historic interest, though the acting is wooden by modern standards. What is less understandable is the mediocre sound quality — many other products from the 1950s have no such shortcomings. In this case it's presumably because of its being a live recording. The DVD's major value is the presence of Lisa Della Casa as Donna Elvira.

I don't much enjoy the conventions of classical ballet, but it's always good to see something done as well as it can be. This was largely true of Fonteyn and Nureyev's *Swan Lake*, with music from the Vienna Philharmonic, and supporting dancers also from Vienna, even though Nureyev's tinkering with the score, plus his own androgynous on-stage persona, have had their critics.

The recording sessions of *West Side Story* are fascinating, and more. Bernstein opted to use opera singers, and then make sure they sang in an idiomatic New York style. Carreras, for instance, talks about being the only Spaniard in the cast (as Tony), yet having to sound like a New Yorker. It's astonishing to watch tension rising as Bernstein rebukes someone for giving Carreras elocution lessons over the microphone, Carreras's unsmiling face in close-up, then the inevitable crisis. This is hugely watchable stuff.

"The pleasures of love are brief, like a flower that blooms and dies." So sing the lovers early in *La Traviata*, and to stress the fact the only thing on stage is a huge clock set at two minutes to twelve. Slightly simplistic, you might think. But the orchestral playing by the Vienna Philharmonic is very strong, and Nettebko and Villazon, though not in the class of Callas or Pavarotti, make a seductively young and charismatic pair. Thomas Hampson is a predictably sturdy Germont.

The other items included, all top examples in their respective categories, are *Carmen* with Vickers, Mutter playing Mozart, Carlos Kleiber's *Rosenkavalier*, the Boulez/Chereau *Die Walkure*, Pollini and Bohm in Beethoven, Verdi's *Requiem* conducted by Karajan in 1967 with the young Pavarotti (not to be confused with his

1984 version with Carreras), and *Peter and the Wolf* narrated by Sting, with the UK's Spitting Image puppets.

All in all, this collection constitutes a once-in-a-lifetime bargain that isn't to be missed.

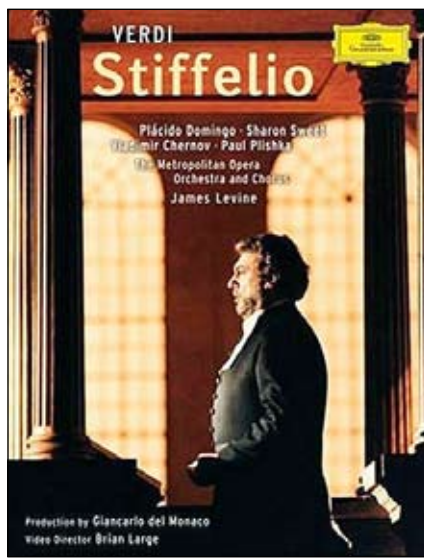
When the curtain rose in January last year on the Metropolitan Opera's *Stiffelio*, it was Placido Domingo who conducted. Singers all have to make provision for the days when their voices are no longer what they were, and Domingo already heads both the Washington National Opera and the Los Angeles Opera. But his return to the Met to conduct what used to be called Verdi's "lost" opera had an extra significance. When it was last seen there it was he who was on stage in the title role. And in 2007 a very welcome DVD was issued of that performance, filmed when the production was first launched in 1993.

*Stiffelio* was indeed all but lost for a long time. Verdi wrote it in 1850, just before *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata*, but it ran into censorship problems. Unusually for Verdi, it was about Protestants — a pastor in Germany who discovers that his wife has been having an affair. The concept of a minister of religion being married at all was incomprehensible to most Italians, and from the beginning cuts were demanded. In addition, the

northeast of Italy was at the time under Austrian control and, at a time when the movement for Italian unification was gaining strength, marital infidelity involving a German-speaking pastor could easily be read as a politically inspired insult to the region's overlords. The opera's troubled premiere took place, significantly in the northeast, in Trieste.

*Stiffelio* was in effect strangled at birth. The score was never published, and was long thought to have been lost; Verdi responded by incorporating much of the music into a new opera, *Aroldo*, set in the conveniently remote Middle Ages. But then in 1960s a copy of the score was discovered in Naples. Before long opera companies round the world began to express an interest in staging it, an enthusiasm that was stoked by a second discovery, that of Verdi's original manuscript, in the early 1990s. The magnificent Met production seen on this 2007 DVD was actually the first ever modern production, in its original form, of what many were soon to be calling one of Verdi's middle-period masterpieces.

The staging is sumptuous, with little sign of Puritan restraint. Luxurious interiors of polished wood carved in the Gothic style vie with interior windows through which other rooms, containing people doing other things, can be seen.



**STIFFELIO**  
Verdi  
Domingo, Sweet, Chernov  
DGM 073 42886

The whole effect, costumes included, is one of black, brown and gleaming silver.

Domingo is in superlative form, with the seriousness of the character matching his own personality. Sharon Sweet is powerful as his wife Lina, and Vladimir Chernov is outstanding as her father. James Levine conducts the whole magnificent undertaking.



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## Hardcover: UK

## A history of linguistic globalization

Robert McCrum charts the internationalization of English in this fascinating but flawed hymn to the language

BY DEBORAH CAMERON  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

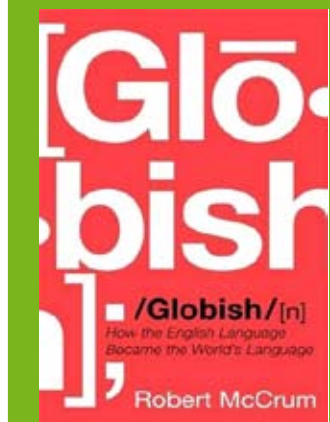
Last month, as volcanic ash drifted across the skies of Europe, I found myself in a van traveling from Dubrovnik to Antwerp with a Belgian, a German, a Turkish couple living in the Netherlands, a Russian studying in Dublin, a Chinese woman heading to Beijing via Amsterdam, and two Croatian drivers whose services we had hired. How did we communicate? In English, of course. That "of course" is the starting point for Robert McCrum's book, an account of how English achieved its present status, framed by an argument about the present and future consequences.

Perhaps oddly given this framing, most of the book is devoted to tracing the development of English from the 5th century to the 20th century. This is a much-told tale, and McCrum presents the usual facts in the usual way, a combination of Boy's Own adventure story ("the suspenseful narrative of a people and their successive empires coming out of nowhere to create a culture that — against all odds — has achieved lasting global consequence") and breathless hagiography ("the indefinable genius ... of the English language has always been to adapt itself, like mercury, to every new contour"). It is *Land of Hope and Glory* recast as a hymn to the language.

But Globish belongs to a new post-imperial wave in which the story has been reframed to make it less Anglocentric. McCrum is one of several recent writers who argue that the latest and greatest achievement of English is to have transcended the legacy of empire. Today its bounds are set so wide that it can truly be said to belong to the world. While its triumph continues, it is no longer coterminous with the triumph of the English-speaking peoples. Some commentators even suggest that it may now be happening at their expense. That is the view of Jean-Paul Nerriere, the French businessman who coined the term "globish" in 1995. He had noticed that non-native English speakers in Asia found it easier to do business with one another than with native speakers. Globish was his name for the kind of English they were using: a "decaffeinated" version without complexity or cultural baggage.

Rather than duplicating the expressive functions of a mother tongue, globish meets our practical need for a universal "other tongue" — a simple, neutral, intelligible medium for cross-cultural communication. And as it spreads, Nerriere predicts, it will reduce the international influence of English and eliminate the advantage long enjoyed by its native speakers. If in future the world's business is conducted in globish, native

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GLOBISH: HOW THE ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE BECAME  
THE WORLD'S LANGUAGE

BY ROBERT MCCRUM  
310 PAGES  
VIKING

Anglophones, like everyone else, will find themselves obliged to learn it.

For McCrum, the political implications are profound: "Today, in every country struggling to participate in capitalist democracy, it is globish that provides the main avenue of advancement." Authoritarian regimes that want the capitalism without the democracy

will not survive in a world where, thanks to globish, "everyone has access to an unlimited supply of data which floats ... in the infinite reservoir of cyberspace."

But this argument depends on conflating different kinds of global English. In interviews and comments McCrum has insisted that what he means by globish is a reduced auxiliary language with no native speakers, like the version promoted by Nerriere; but many of the examples he uses in the book concern the varieties spoken in postcolonial societies such as India and Nigeria, which do have some native speakers, serve a full range of communicative functions, and are not globally intelligible or culturally neutral. At times he even uses "globish" to refer to the language in which G8 leaders give international press conferences — though in fact this is simply English, used by non-native elites in a way that diverges minimally from native norms.

What is obscured when these distinctions are elided is the difference between a language's currency and its value. The Chinese researcher who sat next to me in the van had written her doctoral thesis on something McCrum treats as strong evidence for his argument: the increasing importance of English in China. But while her research did confirm that proficiency in English was strongly linked to success in

the new capitalist order, it also found that the English that paid dividends was an elite variety acquired through extensive education, which was therefore only accessible to a small and privileged minority.

This is the downside of linguistic globalization: It may help to level the playing field between nations, but it also exacerbates inequality within them. Knowing 1,500 words of English, or a vernacular variety whose currency is purely local, does not give you access to the riches of cyberspace, let alone to wealth and power. Nor is the language an avenue of advancement for the estimated 75 percent of the world's population who do not speak any English at all. Pankaj Mishra, writing about India, suggested recently in these pages that inequality is the specter haunting global capitalism; English is part of that story too.

But the genre McCrum is writing in prefers to accentuate the positive. The triumph of English can have no limits and no downside, and the only proper response is celebration. A unique and special language with an indefinable genius ... Even when its story is rewritten for the global age, these old clichés about English linger on.

Deborah Cameron's *The Myth of Mars and Venus* is published by OUP.