



# **The Jane Austen Remedy**

It is a truth universally acknowledged  
that a book can change a life

**Ruth Wilson**

Allison & Busby Limited  
11 Wardour Mews  
London W1F 8AN  
*allisonandbusby.com*

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2022.

Copyright © 2022 by RUTH WILSON

The moral right of the author is hereby asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

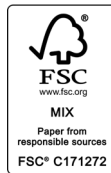
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent buyer.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2930-2

Typeset in 11.5/16.5 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by Allison & Busby Ltd



The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

## *Author's Note*

A memoir of any sort can be a revelation to the writer as well as to the reader. The experience of writing becomes part of the story, a creative act that might be considered either brave or foolish, perhaps both. It is possible that the relationships I examine in this reading memoir will be misunderstood. It may be that at times my memory falters. So it has been helpful to me – and might be useful to readers – to recall the warning issued by the narrator of Jane Austen's novel *Emma*: 'Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken.'

## *Introduction*

# Love and Happiness

*Perfect happiness, even in memory, is not common . . .*

JANE AUSTEN, *EMMA*

I was approaching sixty when questions about what it means to be happy assumed a special significance in my life, setting me on a new path that led to a careful re-reading of Jane Austen's six novels. On a crisp winter day in 1992 I was sitting in my car, waiting impatiently at a traffic light; without warning the red circle started to spin crazily, and again without warning I was hurtled into a vortex of incomprehension. Momentarily I lost my bearings, but I managed somehow to make my way home and climb the stairs to my apartment, where I lay in a darkened room for twenty-four hours. The following day the condition was diagnosed as Meniere's syndrome; the symptoms include hearing loss, nausea and vertigo.

The experience was disconcerting and left me shaken; but more disconcerting still was my experience a few weeks later, at a surprise party that had been arranged for my birthday. I entered a room to find sixty people, their faces covered with silver masks. I realised that behind the masks there were many good friends

and loving members of my family, but as they clapped and cheered I was overcome by a strange antipathy. As the scene dissolved into a silvery nightmare, I felt like a character in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea*; overcome by a sensation that was palpably physical and eerily metaphysical, too. I was shifting in and out of my body as I went through Austenian motions of civility and courtesy. I greeted guests and made conversation, I responded to kind words, but I was in some place else. I was watching myself and wondering who I was. In a revelatory surge, I had stumbled into a moment of truth: I was out of love with the world and I was not happy.

I am often compelled to revisit that existential turning point. It was awful in the sense that I am filled with awe whenever I remember it: the awe of experiencing the astounding connection between body and soul. Because I think that my body was telling me that my soul, however such an entity is conceptualised, was ailing. My physical symptoms represented a state of mind; I felt insufficiently loved, less than happy, and touched by grief: for myself, for what I felt I had not achieved, for the years that lay ahead.

But how to explain it? I had lost no one. I had reached the age of sixty with my family intact and my days filled with projects that interested me. It might seem that my life, like that of Jane Austen's heroine Emma, united some of the best blessings of existence. And yet, I was experiencing something more devastating than the distress and vexation that Emma encounters on her way to self-knowledge. I felt utterly lost. I sought professional help and was comforted by the assurance that Meniere's syndrome sometimes mimics depression. Medication was prescribed, I gave up eating salt, and I resumed my busy routine.

\* \* \*

On the surface, life continued to be ordinary. I managed to function well enough on a number of community committees and as a consultant for the implementation of classroom oral history programs, despite intermittent symptoms. When a family legacy came my way, I bought a small cottage in the Southern Highlands, a two-hour drive from Sydney. I reminded myself that, even as a child, I had always enjoyed my own company. Aware that I had spent my adult life deferring, like so many women of my generation, to the assumed male authority of the household, I decided to put the cottage in my name alone.

Everyone recognises Virginia Woolf's phrase, 'a room of one's own'. I had surpassed Woolf's aspirations. Suddenly I had not only a room, I was the fortunate owner of a whole house. And, as Germaine Greer averred in *The Female Eunuch*, a book that changed the way I thought about my place in the world, it was money that had made the difference between unhappiness and something else. Jane Austen knew this all too well, as the poet W.H. Auden intimates in a verse that conveys with mock horror his shock that an English spinster appears to advocate mercenary marriages.

The Bloomsbury legend, as Virginia Woolf became known, was herself damaged by a grim patriarchal background, but she famously showed the world of women that genius can accomplish writing miracles. Her fiction is full of women engaged in the struggle. From Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway* to Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, women waver between acquiescence and independent action. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf took Jane Austen as her example in a lecture to female undergraduates. She lifted

the author's shimmering veil of associations and imaginings to reveal how astutely Jane Austen understood the role played by the patriarchy in normalising the subordination of women, and how effectively she camouflaged that knowledge.

It seems to me, however, that Woolf, for all her interest in women and fiction, closed the door on an equally deserving and much larger section of the female population: women like me who don't necessarily write fiction. All women need their own space to inhabit, their own air to breathe.

I was less endowed with imagination than Jane Austen but more fortunate than she when it came to 'pewter', as she and her wealthy brother, Edward, referred to money. My family legacy was a miraculous gift, providing me with a refuge from the city at a time when I suspected that recurring physical symptoms might signal an unacknowledged form of emotional distress.

Thirty years later I read a novel called *Secrets of Happiness*. The American novelist Joan Silber creates six narrators who struggle to find moments of happiness among the pressures and tensions of everyday life in contemporary western society. Abby, my favourite character in the book, comforts her grieving son with a verse by Langston Hughes. The American poet exhorts us to hold fast to our dreams lest they should, like a broken-backed bird, die before they can take flight.

No words could better capture the mood of my life when I retreated from the city.

My cottage came to represent a piece of real estate in which my state of mind might be remedied. It stood at the top end of a steep and winding road, in a location comparable in size to Meryton where the Bennet family lived; also to Emma's Highbury, 'a large

and populous village almost amounting to a town. . . ' I started to spend my weekends there, getting to know a community like the one Austen described to her niece Fanny as 'just the thing' to be of interest to a fiction writer – or, in my case, a fiction reader. I was hoping for a remedy: a panacea for a malaise that I could no longer dismiss.

I had thought I was doing well enough, but as I was arranging the photographs that recorded a gathering on my seventieth birthday, I noticed that I was not smiling in any of them. I wondered why, for someone so privileged, I looked miserable. Was I becoming a misanthrope? I asked myself. The expression on my face seemed to embody Elizabeth Bennet's observation to her sister Jane: 'There are few people whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well . . . The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it.'

I am reminded as I write now of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, a novel about a butler who looks back on a life lived in the shadows of other people's expectations and his own sense of duty, eschewing risk and declining to embrace life on its own terms. I remember asking myself then how I wanted to spend the remains of my own days, perhaps not in those words. I knew one thing for certain: I wanted something to change. There and then I decided to stake a claim to my space, to make my cottage in the Southern Highlands into my permanent home, to spend my time trying to understand my malaise, to find a happier way of being.

After fifty years of marriage, it was a difficult, complicated and emotionally painful decision. My husband was, I think, bewildered. I had never discovered a way to convey to him the intensity of my own feelings, the waves of frustration and regret that swept over me periodically, strong feelings that men are prone



to dismiss as female hysteria. I longed to make decisions without being challenged, to be the one who sometimes had the last word, especially in matters that were chiefly my personal concern. I was tired, I realised; I was especially tired of being surrounded by people whose values I could no longer pretend to share. I had no idea how it would turn out for any of us as a family, but it was, I thought, time to take my turn; a last chance to examine what had become of a girl's once-upon-a-time great expectations of life.

I had been having recurring dreams in which sounds formed in my throat, but words failed to emerge. They were trapped in my larynx, struggling to be heard. My voice, which my elocution teacher had taught me to value as a musician would value a cherished instrument, had gone missing.

I wanted it back.

It occurred to me that my greatest love outside family and work had always been a love of reading fiction; of all the novels I had read, Jane Austen's were my benchmark for pleasure as her heroines had been models for the sort of woman I wanted to become. A nostalgia for those books swept over me. So I decided to think of recovery as a rehabilitation of my reading life, and to start by revisiting the six novels. I wanted to re-read those passages that had made Austen's fiction important to me: the *bons mots*, the well-worn quotations and the lively conversations. I didn't know it then, but I was embarking on an untested approach to reading. I was making Austen's novels a starting point for exploring the satisfactions and dissatisfactions of my own life, framed and illuminated by her fictional universe.

I had not been idle. I cast my mind back now to the years of my fourth and fifth decades, when I had plunged into a period

of learning and doing: a postgraduate degree, participation in boards of management, coordination of intergenerational school programs, journal publications and a book about the art of interviewing. The curriculum vitae looked good, my endeavours had brought me rewards and even an award or two. But like the narrator in Nora Ephron's book *Heartburn* I failed to grasp the irrelevance of what I was so busy doing at the time. When I contemplated the prospect of facing life on my own I connected with Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James. She undertook a solitary midnight meditation to calibrate her moral compass and consider where her destiny lay. I was inspired by her example, although I never reconciled myself to her decision to remain with a husband whose nature repelled her. But that was Isabel's own fictional business.

I would do it differently; I would re-examine my lived life in the context of my reading life, hoping that I would better understand and hopefully transform my perplexed state of mind. So I decided to read all six of Jane Austen's novels with greater intent; reliving the past pleasure but also opening my mind to other possibilities, bringing the full complement of my feelings, thoughts and lived experiences to the act and art of reading.

Austen's fiction is sometimes concerned with improving the estate. So, I renovated my cottage at the top of the hill. It wasn't as challenging as the task that Mr Rushworth faced at Sotherton, in the novel *Mansfield Park*, but I started with colour. I had the walls painted yellow, the colour of sunshine, inside and out. A craftsman in a nearby village copied a Frank Lloyd Wright design for glass panes and inserted them in a

frame to make a welcoming front door. I chose a tall slender lamppost to light the entrance at night. A friendly gardener helped me plant beds of cream and green hellebores under the mature rhododendron trees and masses of graceful bluebells under the birches. From a newly built elevated reading room with vast windows I looked out on a maple grove and up a thickly wooded hill. Like Emma, I rejoiced in the ‘exquisite sight, smell, sensation of nature, tranquil, warm, and brilliant after a storm’; the difference was that Emma’s storm was past, and mine was still raging inside me.

My life seemed to have been following a decade-long pattern. It turned out that I would live in the cottage that I called Lantern Hill, after a favourite childhood book, for almost ten years, during which I discovered just such a small piece of canvas in regional Australia as the one that served Austen as she sketched her typically English comedies of manners. I lived alone but I was less lonely than I had been earlier in my life. People made judgements; I didn’t heed them. Some asked questions; I didn’t answer them. Others – mainly women – understood, because they, too, had experienced the unbearable loneliness of marriage. And the only friends I retained were people I cared for and about.

I filled my days with reading, sometimes alone, sometimes in the excellent company of other Austen readers. These were different ways of reading, and each had its rewards. My three daughters remained, as always, the closest and most beloved friends of all, my latter-day heroines. During this period, they taught me as much as they had, I hoped, learned from me.

For the first time in my mature adult life I took a risk.