



EVERY YEAR JANE AUSTEN FANS GATHER IN NORTH CAROLINA TO BRING THE AUTHOR'S WORLD TO LIFE, AS ASHLEY OLDHAM REPORTS. PICTURES BY GARLAND RIEMAN

# Summer loving

OUTSIDE THE SUBURBAN hotel, the summer sun beat down on to the streets of a quiet downtown. Some people went for leisurely walks, while a few ducked in and out of shops, but the sleepy college town just a few blocks away felt empty by comparison with the influx of students who would arrive in the autumn. However, inside the hotel was a completely different scene: scholars, students and readers young and old buzzed about the lobby and conference room, eagerly making friends, listening to panels and discussing their favourite subject with a singular passion. This weekend was all in the name of an author who died 203 years ago. Welcome to the Jane Austen Summer Program (JASP).

The program is billed as an “annual symposium for all Austen readers” – and that does mean *all*. Professors, teachers and people who simply *enjoy* Austen. Readers finishing up middle school, readers who are retired and enjoying literature in their free time, and a little bit of everyone in between, even spanning nations around the globe – from the United States and Canada to Hong Kong.

Held in June each year, this award-winning four-day event is down the road from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, nestled in the small town of Carrboro. But don't let the words “small town” deceive you: the program overflows with activities, guest speakers, small-group discussions, teacher sessions, dance practices, a ball and more. Since its founding in 2013, each program takes a closer look into one of Austen's works and then finds new and exciting ways to delve deeper into it. This year's JASP, ‘Jane Austen's World’, was due to centre on Austen's letters and Claire Tomalin's biography *Jane Austen: A Life*.

Last year's program, ‘*Pride & Prejudice* and Its Afterlives’, aimed to do just that – namely, by examining the novel's legacy across various media and cultures. From Austen's time to present day, *Pride &*

Guests with a cardboard cutout of Colin Firth during the Jane Austen Summer Program in 2019

*Prejudice* has weaved its way into popular media, from modern retellings in novels to cinematic adaptations. To showcase this, guest speakers at the 2019 JASP included the writers of three multicultural *Pride & Prejudice* retellings: Soniah Kamal, Uzma Jalaluddin and Sonali Dev.

Kamal, author of *Unmarriageable*, found that one of her most notable memories from JASP came from stumbling upon poster presentations given by UNC students, one in particular on her own novel. “I wasn't expecting it,” she says. “It was more of a shock. The other posters I had seen were more contemporary or matched the films, but all of a sudden I came across this, and he was giving his speech about the poster and then we had a long chat afterwards ... It was interesting to see someone having read *Unmarriageable* in such depth – seeing your novel from an observer's perspective.”

For Dr Inger Brodey, co-founder of JASP and a professor at UNC, this type of interaction shows how organisers have overcome one challenging aspect of the program. “I'm always very vigilant about

making sure it stays egalitarian,” Brodey says. “I always try to remind both types of audiences that they can learn from the other, and so I also try to invite speakers that aren't going to talk down to the audience.” At JASP, the connection between guest speakers and attendees runs deeper than listening to a talk. Instead it leads to moments of learning, growth and appreciation on both sides.

For Dev, author of *Pride, Prejudice, and Other Flavors*, those moments include seeing “so tangibly how your work can last ... It's life-altering to see how far your work can reach.” Dev enjoyed discussing Austen specifically, spinning “the themes of what she was talking about in a way that's so relevant to cultures outside of what she lived in”. Dev says the 2019 event was important “to show that south Asian culture is not a monolith ... If someone tried to describe one of our books, they would say it's a south Asian retelling of *Pride & Prejudice*, which is almost hilarious in how that one line describes each one of our books, and each one of our books is completely different.”







This was, for Dev, the most special thing to consider about her experience at the program.

During her talk at last year's conference, Jalaluddin, author of *Ayesha at Last*, said, "The books you read when you're young last the rest of your life", underscoring the need for more diverse literature. She says she appreciated that JASP highlighted three authors, "all presenting three different perspectives and takes on Austen". She also enjoyed that JASP allows for so many conversations to be had about Austen.

For Jalaluddin, the best way to do that is through the context corners. These 15-minute talks given by UNC graduate students provide historical context to the piece of writing being discussed at the program. Afterwards, attendees split into groups of 10 to 15 to discuss questions raised during the context corner. The symposium's capacity (last year's was capped at about 130 attendees) gives the small-group discussions an intimate feel. Jalaluddin says the discussions were important because they allowed JASP attendees to share their thoughts on Austen informally.

Dev says her group discussions tended to be "western, and to be able to switch that lens up was incredible fun" when it came to people imagining different life experiences, something she found "very enriching". For Katie Cuthbertson, a recent graduate of UNC's master of arts in teaching course, the informal discussions – think "book club" instead of business meeting – allowed her to "totally geek out" about the history and

context of the novels. She says she enjoyed "hearing from people who aren't in the teaching profession who love Jane Austen, hearing different perspectives and what it is that other people love about it and how they respond to different characters".

Yet there is more to do at JASP than sit and talk. "This is more than a sit-in-the-classroom conference. We offer attendees a range of hands-on activities in addition to panels and presentations," says Jennifer Abella, publicity chair of the program. Educators can attend forums focusing on ways to teach Austen's works in the classroom; craft-minded JASP-ers can try their hand at making accessories such as reticules or turbans; bibliophiles can attend a specially curated rare-book exhibit, often including first or early editions of Austen's novels, at UNC's Wilson Library; and shoppers can browse the books, bonnets and more at the Emporium. In addition, JASP also stages an original theatrical production each year.

In 2019 there was, for the first time, a creative writing workshop. Limited to only 20 attendees, the workshop offered the opportunity to refine participants' writing skills. Ophelia Tung, a graduate student from Hong Kong, participated in the workshop led by Professor Randall Kenan of UNC's creative writing program, Eleanor Griggs of UNC's English and Comparative Literature department, and Soniah Kamal, who is on the faculty at Reinhardt University in Georgia. Though nervous about sharing her piece, Tung "caught Soniah's eyes. She gave me an affirming nod, and it was all I needed to gather my courage and volunteer to share my piece." Tung adds: "Soniah's encouragement meant a lot to me, as it not only led to a wonderful start to my time at the program, but also served as a reminder that I should always be proud of my culture, my heritage, and my craft."

JASP also offers another chance to learn something in an area that many attendees may not have attempted before: dancing.

**Above, Uzma Jalaluddin, author of *Ayesha at Last*, a modern-day retelling of *Pride & Prejudice* set in a Muslim community in Toronto, signing books. Right, the ball at last year's Jane Austen Summer Program**







Jack Maus, the instructor, has been teaching at JASP every year since the program's founding in 2013. He and his crew give step-by-step instructions to all the dances that are performed at the ball (held on the last night of the program), doing everything from calling out each step over a microphone to dancing alongside those taking part. Maus says he relishes the joy he gets "from dancing with people who are new to this". English country dancing is ever-evolving, he says, "from the 17th-century, [into] Austen's era and even through today".

For many, the ball truly rounds out the JASP experience. Some dress in Regency attire that appears to come straight out of Austen's world. Brodey says the ball is just one example of "the ways in which people combine their contemporary lives with the

Above, Terri O'Quin and Gisele Rankin view the rare-book exhibit, including a first edition of *Pride & Prejudice*, at the Wilson Library on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Right, taking dance lessons at the program

historical knowledge", citing a picture of people from last year's ball "in impeccable Regency garb high-fiving each other". She adds: "People can come in whatever they want to the ball. They're not going to feel *not* included, and yet we still also are able to attract those people who love the historical accuracy, down to the whale bone." While you might not be able to go *quite* down to the whale bone, JASP does round out the ball experience by offering costume rentals (and last year held a hair workshop to give some visitors Regency-inspired updos).

Through the years, Brodey has seen JASP evolve. The idea for the program was born after visiting "Dickens Universe" at the University of California at Santa Cruz with Dr James Thompson, a UNC colleague and JASP co-founder. They came away with the "idea of running something similar, kind of a Jane Austen Universe or Jane Austen Village at UNC". Indeed, the two events share a



few elements: a focus on a particular author, lectures, group discussions and dancing. Brodey says that she and Thompson aimed to combine "elements of that, and elements of what the Jane Austen Society of North America does", along with some new ideas to help JASP "sustain year to year".

And sustain it has. In fact, JASP has sold out for the past four years. Although it could easily expand, Brodey says, "the beautiful thing about it is the intimate community ... It would run counter to the identity of JASP if we let it get too big." In planning future programs, organisers aim to focus on balancing content. "We actually have the next five years planned in terms of topics ... and we're going to experiment with some themes and pairings for a while," Brodey says. Here's a sneak peek: that future includes pairings between Austen and Brontë as well as Austen and Shakespeare.

As JASP 2019 came to a close, there was a constant chatter as participants shuffled out of the hotel lobby – they weren't sad,

but excitedly recalling another year of discussions, dances and activities that had celebrated their beloved Austen. There was a magic in the air, from the discussions to the dances, that kept attendees wanting *more*. When asked just *what* makes JASP so special, Brodey replied: "People come to be a part of the community, a very open – open and knowledgeable – community that is full of love for the subject and respect for the differences among us." It is a community that one could imagine Austen might adore. ✦

Because of the coronavirus pandemic this year's program has been moved to 2021

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