

The Declaration of Independents



OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE INDEPENDENT AUTHORS GUILD

JANUARY 2008

Jane Austen: The Television Years

Masterpiece Classic to Air Adaptations of Jane Austen's Novels

By Mary Lydon Simonsen

The celebration of all things Jane Austen continues in January 2008 when *Masterpiece Classic* (formerly *Masterpiece Theater*) presents a series of adaptations of all six of the author's completed novels, as well as a new "biopic" based on the author's diaries and letters. PBS kicks off the series with the airing of *Persuasion* on January 13 and concludes with *Sense and Sensibility* on April 6.

It is now 193 years since Miss Austen put pen to paper, and yet she is more popular than ever. Complex characters, intricate plots and brilliant dialogue are just a few of the reasons why her fans are legion. Her novels continue to delight because they portray communities that are microcosms of the larger world she inhabits. Everything that is good and bad, serious and silly, important and trivial in society can be found in *Pride and Prejudice's* village of Meryton, and all the highs and lows of courtship and love are embodied in *Sense and Sensibility's* Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. Although Jane Austen's novels are set in a pre-industrial England where factories and time clocks didn't exist, she connects to our complicated modern world because her characters are our families, friends and neighbors or at least we would like them to be.

The following is the PBS schedule and a primer for the uninitiated.

Persuasion – January 13: Anne Elliot, the daughter of a self-indulgent baronet whose spending necessi-

tates the family's move from a large country estate to smaller accommodations in Bath, faces spinsterhood because she had refused the hand of a naval officer on the advice of a friend who believed that she would be marrying beneath her. After nine years at sea, Captain Wentworth, now a rich man because of prize money he received for capturing French ships during the Napoleonic Wars, encounters Anne while visiting the Musgrove family where his fortune and availability draw the attention of Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove. All parties converge on Bath where ladies have come seeking husbands and men have come in search of fortunes. Also arriving in Bath is William Elliot, a family relation and one-time heir to the estate of Anne's father, and his attentions to Anne are noted by her former suitor. Will Mr. Elliot make an offer of marriage, and if so, is it of any interest to Captain Wentworth?

Northanger Abbey – January 20: Although published posthumously in 1818, *Northanger Abbey* is Jane Austen's earliest novel and a satire on the gothic novels that were so popular at the end of the 18th century. The heroine, Catherine Morland, the impressionable daughter of a country parson, visits Northanger Abbey after meeting Henry Tilney at a dance in Bath. Fueled by an overactive imagination, Catherine sees menace everywhere. However, it is not monsters that lurk in the locked rooms and suspicious chests but the hypocrisy, vanity and greed of "polite" society.

Mansfield Park – January 27: *Mansfield Park* is one of Jane Austen's "mature" novels and her most seri-

ous. It is the story of Fanny Price, a poor, shy, almost puritanical child, who is taken in by her wealthy aunt and uncle, Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram. Despite her splendid surroundings, Fanny, who lives in the attic, is unhappy and spends a good deal of her time observing and judging the failings of her extended family and imagining a relationship with her cousin, Edmund Bertram. Fanny incurs the Bertrams' displeasure when she rejects Henry Bertram and is punished by being sent back to her impoverished family. Fanny is a stoic Cinderella waiting for her prince.

Miss Austen Regrets – February 3: According to the PBS Website, *Miss Austen Regrets* tells the true story of Austen's life based on her own letters and diaries. "The biopic is the frosting on the cake: an intimate portrait of the remarkable woman behind these wonderful stories."

Pride & Prejudice – February 10 – 24 (three 2-hour episodes): *Pride and Prejudice* tells the story of the bumpy



Jane Austen is coming to TV thanks to PBS.

road to love between the daughter of a gentleman farmer and a member of England's elite upper class. Jane Austen's most popular novel has everything: vanity, power, separations, misunderstandings, seduction.

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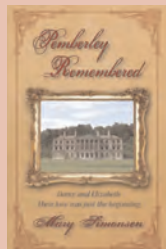
It also has a mature heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, who is willing to risk spinsterhood rather than marry a man whose proposal is insulting and belittling. Elizabeth's rejection of his offer of marriage causes Mr. Darcy to examine his own conduct, and an enlightened Darcy recognizes that Elizabeth's intelligence, wit, and charm are more important than her social standing. Acknowledging the reformation, Elizabeth realizes that, shorn of his pride, Mr. Darcy is a gentleman worthy of her love.

Emma – March 23: Emma Woodhouse is unique among Austen's heroines in that she is an heiress with "none of the usual inducements of women to marry." Freed from the necessity of having to find a husband, Emma, at 21, uses her time to play matchmaker for her new acquaintance, Harriet Smith, "the natural daughter of nobody knows whom." Although cautioned by her lifelong friend, Mr. Knightley, that her interference may have unintended consequences, Emma forges ahead. In addition to misjudging every relationship that she becomes involved in, Emma is slow to recognize that her relationship with Mr. Knightley, who is 16 years her senior, has also undergone a transformation. A chastened Emma is forced to acknowledge that superior social standing does not necessarily make one wiser than one's neighbors.

Sense & Sensibility – March 30 and April 6 (two 90-minute episodes): Jane Austen's first published novel is the story of two sisters forced to live in greatly reduced circumstances because their father's will has failed to provide adequately for his daughters. The only hope for the ladies is to make advantageous marriages. Although cautioned against her naïve, romantic notions of love, Marianne Dashwood falls hard for the cad, Willoughby. While Marianne nearly dies because of her

rejection by Willoughby, Elinor suffers in silence when she discovers that the man she was hoping to marry, Edward Ferrars, is secretly engaged. After her brush with death, a wiser Marianne sees her rejected suitor, the staid, but dependable Col. Brandon, in a different light, while her sensible sister, Elinor, remains devoted to the unavailable Mr. Ferrars. ■

Mary Lydon Simonsen is the author of *Pemberley Remembered*, a love story which takes place in postwar London but whose main thread is the timeless tale of Jane Austen's Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy and Miss Elizabeth Bennet. See pemberleyremembered.blogspot.com for details.



America's First Musical Instrument

by Jack Shakely

Almost all of this country's musical instruments, just like our early music, were imported. Stringed instruments came from Italy, reed instruments such as the clarinet and saxophone from France, brass instruments from England (even the arguably American sousaphone is nothing more than a tuba with a bell that points out instead of up). But there is one original—and for almost a century, ubiquitous—American musical instrument: the banjo.

The very earliest banjos were created by African-American slaves who made stringed gourds with animal gut membranes to serve as both sounding board and tambour. But the five-string banjo as we know it today was invented by Joel Sweeney in the early 1820s.

Sweeney's invention swept the nation like a prairie fire, and by the mid-nineteenth century the banjo was the most popular musical instrument in the country, from concert halls to saloons to the family parlor.

Very few American homes, especially in the South or Midwest, could afford a piano, but the banjo was well within the budget of almost every family, and no young lady's training was complete until she had mastered it.

The banjo and banjo music became so popular that an editor of an Atlanta newspaper would write in the 1850s that "The only way to avoid hearing 'Oh Susanna' this weekend would be to commit suicide Thursday night." Confederate General JEB Stuart so loved the banjo that he recruited Joel Sweeney's son, Sam, as his official banjo master. Sweeney served under Stuart in this capacity for the duration of the Civil War, eventually rising to the rank of sergeant.

The greatest writer of banjo music was Stephen Foster. Born and raised in Pennsylvania, Foster nevertheless virtually created the 'Southern' song almost single-handedly. Wildly productive during his brief and tragic life, Foster wrote more than two hundred banjo songs. He died in an alcoholic haze in a walk-up tenement in New York City in 1864, only months after writing 'Beautiful Dreamer'. There is no evidence he ever visited, much less lived in, the South.

Despite popular opinion to the contrary, the banjo refused to be categorized as a Southern instrument. During the Civil War, a savvy banjo virtuoso would mix 'Bonnie Blue Flag' and 'Yellow Rose of Texas' with 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' and 'When Johnny Comes Marching Home' without giving offense to either side. Both North and South laid claim to 'Old Folks at Home', the most popular song of the era.

The greatest banjo virtuoso of the nineteenth century, perhaps of all time, was Dan Emmett. He and his equally-famous partner, guitarist Bill Whitelaw, thrilled American audiences for decades as the stars of such shows as Christy's Minstrels, the

Virginia Minstrels, and Buckley's Serenaders. To confuse those seeking to pigeon-hole banjo music in one region or another even more, Emmett, who was born in New York, wrote 'In Dixie's Land'.

After the turn of the century the banjo left center stage, but never disappeared entirely from the American music scene. Photographs of all the early jazz bands from King Oliver, Kid Ory, and Louis Armstrong to the Kansas City Red Devils, reveal a banjo player—no longer a soloist, but now part of the rhythm section.

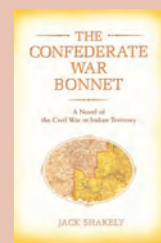
The banjo enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the Dixieland bands of Turk Murphy and the Dukes of

Dixieland, and with folk-pop groups like the Kingston Trio and the Brothers Four. Banjo bars sprang up in Las Vegas and college towns across the country, but their popularity was short-lived.

The amplifier relegated the banjo to the second tier of musical instruments, but occasionally it will crop up again in bluegrass music such as Flatt and Scruggs 'Foggy Mountain Break-down' and 'Ballad of Jed Clampett' or in novelty acts such as the Smothers Brothers and Steve Martin. Perhaps the most prominent banjo virtuoso today is Bela Fleck, a jazz-fusion musician who has played the banjo as the lead instrument on every album he has released.

Although not as popular today, the banjo continues to epitomize the music of the American West and rural South. You only need to hear its ringing to be transported to another time, a time when the banjo was America's Instrument. ■

Jack Shakely is the author of *The Confederate War Bonnet*, a historical novel of the Civil War in Indian Territory, to be published by iUniverse in January 2008. He lives in Rancho Mirage, California.



A Conundrum For You

I was a prof, long ago. I admit I miss my classroom. I taught young folks that writing was hard but fun. You must think about what you say but you can say anything you want if you work at it with lots of application. It was amusing for my kids to jump through hoops in odd ways.

I had a particular drill most thought was too hard for normal humans, but I wouldn't cut any slack on it. It was not optional! This was it: pick a topic, any topic...say, Christmas shopping, a Thanksgiving holiday, a story about a dog or cat, a vacation or trip or party, anything. Turn out a multi-paragraph story about it, as much as 500 words. It had a catch though: you couldn't do it using our most common writing symbol. Oh, such griping! Such bitching! For many, it was difficult. But it got wound up, not always smoothly, and this drill was always known, post hoc, as an amazing thing to attain.

If you think my writing sounds a bit odd, I can slip you a hint: I did it too, just as I told my kids to do. Can you cop to it?

The answer is at the very end of this Newsletter.

BOOK REVIEW

The following review is by Mary Simonsen, author of *Pemberley Remembered*.

The Pict by Jack Dixon

Winner of Honorable Mention for Fiction at the 2007 London Book Festival.

"The battle had been raging for almost an hour before the sun broke the eastern horizon. The new light of the rising sun flashed across Cruithne's axe . . ."

Right out of the gate, the book begins with maces and battle axes flying as the Scythians, ancestors of the Picts, an ancient tribe of Scotland, fight the latest of many battles against the hordes pressing in on them from the eastern steppes of Eurasia. Guided by their warrior leader, Cruithne, the Scythians retreat to the west until they arrive at a northern sea where they must take to the water or submit. Thus begins the epic voyage that will eventually take the refugees to the far north of Caledonia.



For a thousand years, a loose confederation of tribes, each with its own leader, inhabited the Highlands, occasionally joining forces to defeat a common enemy. But their peaceful co-existence ended when the Romans, who had defeated the Britannic tribes to the south, began to march north toward Caledonia. After the massacre of an entire village of the Selgovaii by the Romans, the Pictish tribes once again come together to fight off the legions sent from Rome

to conquer them. Calach, a young warrior who possesses the courage and spirit of Cruithne, is chosen as their leader. Outnumbered by the Romans ten to one, Calach understands that it is only by waging guerilla warfare that the Romans can be defeated.

Other than one major battle, little is known of the Picts' war against Rome except that these primitive people were able to stop the advance of the seasoned and battle-tested Roman legions. Jack Dixon creates a surreal landscape where the eerie sounds of a hundred pipes precede the Picts' attacks on a Roman camp, and phantoms tattooed with demonic symbols emerge silently out of the night to kill their sleeping enemy. But the Romans didn't expand their empire by lying down and playing dead, and Calach pays a personal price in a battle to finish off the Romans.

The momentum of the story builds with each chapter as the warriors arise from the mists of their hills and valleys to fight, retreat, regroup, and fight again in their determination to keep the Romans from making any further incursions into their ancient lands.

Over the centuries, the Picts ceased to exist as a separate people, and together with their Celtic neighbors, became the ancestors of today's Scots. Because of the thin historical record and few artifacts yielded by archeological digs, Jack Dixon must spin a tale from his own understanding of the times, the landscape of the Highlands, and the other inhabitants of Scotland who did leave a record. In this he was successful. The sounds of the bodhran drums pulse throughout the book, leaving the reader wanting to know more about the warriors who fought against the might of the greatest empire on earth and prevailed.

Andalusian Dreams

by Celia Hayes

It is a country of dreams, fragile pavilions, airy courtyards, and meticulously planted gardens, cool trickling fountains and pools, refuges from the harsh summer heat of Southern Spain, that the Moors called Al-Andalus. In this country the bougainvillea vines make a splash of dark red or electrical magenta against whitewashed plaster walls and curved roof tiles of a peculiar faded hue, somewhere between rose pink and honey. In the afternoon, the cicadas make a churring sound in the oleanders in the great enclosed garden of the citadel of the Alhambra high on the Albaicin hill, in the city of Granada.

The place seems deserted of people, only my daughter and I exploring the paths where the white dust settles softly in our footprints as we pass. Behind us is the ruined citadel of the Alcazaba, the fortress looking out over the city below, and the sprawling palace complex of towers and courts, whispering with myrtle leaves and the trickle of water. The Patio of Myrtles ... the Comares Tower, the Hall of the Ambassadors, its interior walls covered with a fine tracery of intricate plaster lace. Our footsteps fall with a faint scuffing sound on the stone floors. The Lions' Court, water bubbling from a great stone basin, born up on the backs of oddly stylized, almost Chinese-looking stone lions, at the center of a forest of slender pillars, branching into more elaborate arching trees of plaster filigree. To me it is a wonderland, a place of enchantment, but something about the rooms opening into the Lion's Court creeps out my daughter. She feels a sense of oppression, the whisper of something bad having happened there, and runs ahead. I follow, doing my best to drink it all in, the fabled rooms and gardens, loggia and court. There was the Queen's mirador, a tower with an

airy latticed window, once with a view into the town below... all ornamented with plasterwork, with tile and magnificent woodwork, the last grand flowering of the Moorish kings in Spain, their paradise on earth, planted with flowers and shrubs to make a living carpet, ornamental trees swaying gracefully in the cool breeze. Boabdil, the last king of Granada, departed in 1491, asking of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic Monarchs, that the gate out of which he left be stopped up and never used again. At the head of the pass leading down towards the sea, he looked back at his glorious citadel and wept.

Granada, the last remnant of Moorish control on the Iberian Peninsula. Once, at the peak of power and glory, the great dynasties—the Umayyad, and after them the Almoravids and the Almohads—held all but Asturias in the far north-west, and went over the Pyrenees as far as Tours before being pushed back by Charles Martel. Moorish rulers held the great cities of Toledo, Cordoba, Seville; shining beacons of learning and culture in the darkness of the European Middle ages. Gloriously adorned with gardens, running water, street-lighting, Cordoba boasted subtle philosophers, learned doctors of medicine, poets and mathematicians, and an atmosphere of toleration that drew on the finest scholars from all three religious traditions. Abd-al-Rahman III, who held supremacy as the Caliph of Cordoba, built himself a great palace outside the city, called the Medinat-al-Zahra. It was palace, garrison, and city all at once, splendid and sprawling... as glittering and ultimately as fragile as a blown glass sculpture. It existed only a bare half-century as the Versailles of Iberia, before it was razed nearly to the ground, and the Caliphate collapsed into a muddle of warring city states. The Christian Reconquest slowly gathered, retaking Toledo by the 11th century, brought to a glorious conclusion by Ferdinand and

Isabella in this very city, in the shimmering fairy-tale palace. Within a few years and decades many others followed King Boabdil into exile, probably many of them looking one last time over their shoulders and weeping for that lost paradise, that splendid dream that was no longer theirs. The exiles took skills, intellect, and trade contacts with them, and Spain glittered for a while, and then grew moribund, rigid, overtaken in intellectual, industrial, and mercantile energy by other countries.

But in the courtyards of Cordoba and Toledo, with the blossoms of orange trees perfuming the twilight air, some still dream—of colonnaded gardens, of fountains of clear water from the snow-melt of the Sierra Nevada, and of taking back the lost paradise of Al-Andalus. ■

Celia Hayes is an avid traveler and blogger, and the author of numerous books including *To Truckee's Trail*. Additional information on her work can be found at www.celiahayes.com.



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Answer to Brain Teaser

The assignment was to write an essay without using the letter "e." If you think it's easy, just try it! You have to concentrate on each word, just like good writers do. And before you give up and go on to something else, consider this: there's a novel written like that! *La Disparition*, written in French in 1969 by Georges Perec. It was translated to English, also without using the letter "e," by Gilbert Adair in 1994 as *A Void*.

Al Past is the author of the *Distant Cousin* series, which contains plenty of "e"s.