

Jane Austen's First Love

by Syrie James

READING GROUP GUIDE

- 1) What challenges does the author face by tackling such a well-known and well-loved literary figure? If you are a reader of Austen, how did this rendering of her early life reflect her own fiction?
- 2) In *Jane Austen's First Love*, we encounter a social sensibility that now appears very gendered and antiquated. What behavior did you observe in the character of Jane Austen that speaks to today's expectations of female independence and autonomy?
- 3) In what ways did Jane subvert expectations as a young unmarried woman? In what ways was she a typical, or even stereotypical, young woman of her time?
- 4) Jane and her companions perform Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in one of the climactic scenes of the book. In what ways does the book resemble a play, and how do each of the characters perform their respective "roles?" Do we see tropes at play: the gallant knight, the wicked witch, etc.?
- 5) Jane and Edward Taylor's courtship begins when Jane and her siblings' carriage is mired in mud. How does the physical act of Jane jumping off the carriage into Edward's arms hint at their future relationship? How do perilous physical situations propel their relationship forward?
- 6) When describing Elizabeth Bridges, Jane says "That charm did not appear to reach great depths, however; for her soft voice appeared more to convey a discharge of a duty to *appear* welcoming, rather than a sincere reflection of the emotion." When are other characters "duty" bound to "appear" a certain way?
- 7) When Cassandra describes the Bridges family as all having "interesting" qualities, Jane says that "interesting" is a term "I reserve to describe people or things so dull or ordinary, that I can find no more promising attribution." When and how do we use euphemisms to obscure our true feelings?
- 8) Why do you think Fanny criticizes her fiancé to others, despite her affection for him? Do you think this episode might sway her to act differently?
- 9) The book deals with the relationship between art and artifice. For example, the play provided Jane with a guise for artifice: her trick of manipulating the two couples. How do art and artifice differ, and where do they intersect?

- 10) Edward Taylor remarks to Jane that in other cultures, there are different expressions of beauty, from feet binding to lip piercings. What cultural practices of beauty are present in this historical novel, and how do they factor into the plot?
- 11) Ultimately, Jane realizes that she is not in love with Edward Taylor as an adult, but he has helped her discover a part of herself. How is finding this other facet of self even more rewarding than her finding a romantic partner? Was it rewarding or disappointing as a reader?
- 12) How does the comedic confusion of the crossed lovers reflect the plays of Shakespeare and *A Midsummer Nights' Dream* in particular? How does Shakespeare reflect the frustrations of romantic love?
- 13) Did your first love change you—for better or worse? How are past relationships of value to our character despite their limited romantic success?
- 14) Jane is smitten with Edward Taylor at their first meeting. What makes him special in her eyes? In what ways are Edward Taylor and Jane similar and different?
- 15) Jane Austen is known for writing strong female characters such as Emma and Elizabeth Bennett. How do those heroines reflect the values and traits of the character of Jane as depicted in this novel?