

The Missing Manuscript of Jane Austen

by Syrie James

READING GROUP GUIDE

- 1) *The Missing Manuscript of Jane Austen* is a novel within a novel. Did you enjoy reading both the present-day story of Samantha and Anthony and the nineteenth-century story of Rebecca Stanhope? Would the book have been equally effective if *The Stanhopes* had been a stand-alone novel?
- 2) Jane Austen wrote that “pictures of perfection make me sick and wicked,” and her main characters usually must acknowledge and learn from their mistakes before they can find happiness. How do Rebecca and Mr. Clifton earn *their* happy ending? What are their respective outlooks on life at the beginning of the novel? How do they each grow and change? How do the lessons they learn affect Samantha and Anthony—and help them earn *their* happy ending?
- 3) Discuss the author’s use of Austen’s *Plan of a Novel* as a plot device for *The Stanhopes*. Why do you think she made this decision? Compare *The Stanhopes* with Austen’s *Plan*. Why do you think the author chose to mirror some elements but not others?
- 4) Were you surprised when you learned the truth about Dr. Jack Watkins, Mr. Clifton, and Amelia Davenport? How does Jane Austen similarly misrepresent the true personalities of characters such as Mr. Darcy, Mr. Wickham, and Isabella Thorpe in her novels?
- 5) Samantha theorizes that Mr. Stanhope and Mr. Spangle might be literary forerunners of Austen’s Mr. Woodhouse and Mr. Collins. What other Austen archetypes inhabit *The Stanhopes*?
- 6) Until Stephen shows up, he is only represented by his text messages and phone conversations. Samantha cares for Stephen, but she wonders if she truly loves him. What did you initially think of Stephen and of their relationship? Did your opinion change throughout the book?
- 7) Rebecca and Samantha both have female relationships that they treasure. How is Rebecca’s friendship with Amelia Davenport and Miss Clifton similar to Samantha’s with Laurel Ann? How is it different? In what ways is Rebecca’s relationship with her sister, Sarah, reminiscent of Jane Austen’s relationship with her sister Cassandra?
- 8) Did your opinion of Anthony change over the course of the novel? Why and how?
- 9) Discuss the various aspects of *The Stanhopes* which lead Samantha to conclude that it is the work of Jane Austen. Did you ever feel as though you were reading an actual “lost” Austen manuscript? If so, how did that make you feel?

- 10) Samantha refers to a scene before the ball where Amelia and Rebecca are “talking at cross purposes” about a pending proposal as “so Austen.” Did you pick out any other “so Austen” moments in *The Stanhopes* and the modern-day story?
- 11) Rebecca Stanhope tells Miss Clifton that her own life used to be very small. Can Samantha say that the same is true for her? How so? Compare the two women’s situations at the beginning and the end of the story.
- 12) Mrs. Harcourt is a complex personality. Did you like her? Why or why not? How does she add to the plot and influence the outcome of the story?
- 13) Anthony eventually tells Samantha that he plans to auction off the manuscript to the highest bidder, regardless of its fate. Anthony values monetary gain, whereas Samantha values scholarship. With whom do you agree and why? Considering the value of the manuscript, if it came into your possession, what would you have done with it?
- 14) Money and its effect on people’s fates is a common theme in Austen’s novels. Discuss the ways in which money, or the lack of it, creates suspense and moves the plot forward in *The Stanhopes*. While reading the novel, what did you think happened to the sum that disappeared at The King’s Arms at Leatherhead? Did you at any time think Mr. Stanhope might have been culpable?
- 15) Did you think that Mr. Clifton would propose to Miss Russell? What did you expect when he returned from his trip?
- 16) Samantha says that the male suitor who is painted as charming at the beginning of most Austen novels usually ends up being the wrong match for the novel’s heroine. Were you aware of this? If so, did it shape your first impression of the male characters that both Rebecca and Samantha encounter?
- 17) Laurel Ann is happy for Samantha when she announces that she will return to Oxford to complete her Ph.D. Likewise, Miss Clifton comes around to the fact that her brother is marrying Rebecca instead of her friend, Laura Russell. In both cases, the ability to accept change is a redeeming quality in these friendships. How does each character’s response to change and adversity affect the outcome of their individual story line?
- 18) What do Anthony’s and Mr. Clifton’s actions tell us about them, particularly at the end of the story? How do their deeds and choices make them worthy Austen heroes?
- 19) How does the author make us sympathize with and respect Rebecca and Samantha? Are they worthy Austen heroines?
- 20) Rebecca receives a number of offers of marriage in the book. How does each man’s manner of proposing reflect his personality, the depth of his feelings, and his suitability as a life partner for Rebecca?
- 21) How did your experience reading *The Stanhopes* compare to other Jane Austen novels you’ve read? Do you think Jane would have approved?