

## PREFACE

How it's possible I made it through high school without reading *Pride and Prejudice*, I don't know—it was the 70s—but I'll always be indebted to my sister, who gave me a copy for a long plane ride after college. Now, given all of the attention it has received over the past thirty years, it's practically commonplace to love this novel. And I do; I love *Pride and Prejudice*. I love how everyone I know, and some of whom I don't, show up in the pages — and how when I read it, I can think I'm as authentic and stand-up as Elizabeth, when in fact, my “nerves” edge me closer to being Mrs. Bennet. (And because I must mention I loved it before the A&E and BBC productions, I see I'm really Lady Catherine.)

The truth of the matter is, I'm an artist who studies old magazines, looking for things to cut out for my watercolor-collages like when I was a little girl making paper doll houses out of our *House and Gardens*. And that's what I was doing in 2005, in a period of rereading *Pride and Prejudice*, when the story sneaked into my work. I didn't start off thinking I was making illustrations; I was beginning a new series of collages and just started seeing the characters in figures I was cutting out. A woman would look haughty and I'd think, “Oh, she's Miss Bingley.” Before I knew what was happening, a lady and her refrigerator had become Charlotte. That was the first illustration.

Any devoted Austen reader knows how the words get into your head—“What is that you are saying, Fitzwilliam? What is it you are talking of? What are you telling Miss Bennett? Let me hear what it is.” The voices and vintage imagery jumped together out of my control. I became obsessed and started painting landscapes in vivid colors to match the scenery in my head: towering blue squares as the windows at Netherfield, a pale bedroom for Elizabeth and Jane, the checkerboard floor of Lady Catherine's house at Rosings Park. I was like a Peeping Tom looking in the window just wanting to see what was going on. I searched for images that captured the characters in the moment. This meant that Elizabeth might have dark hair at Netherfield and then be blonde in the garden at Longbourne, but the changing faces made sense because they highlighted all that is universal and ephemeral in *Pride and Prejudice*—emotions, perceptions, desires.

Then something surprised me. Not the idea that this imagery is floating around in so many women's collective unconscious, or that I get nostalgic over ads for stockings and sweater-sets, but something else. Sifting through hundreds of old magazines, I started to notice the pictures and the novel were telling me the very same story. Viewing these iconic images of American women through the lens of *Pride and Prejudice* made me see that the social conventions and restrictions in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s were not so different from

those in 1813, the year *Pride and Prejudice* was first published. A girdle is still a girdle. These were women I recognized: my mother, my grandmother, my sisters. I had slipped the surface to see a history we share. And as glamorous cutouts came alive a little, I could understand the silky vision of the 1950s better. The black and white of the 1930s. And what came before. And what came after. And that's what always hits me when I read this book—the disorienting, almost giddy, feeling of time travel. The clothes and language are old-fashioned, but everyone is real. Charlotte padding around Hunsford parsonage, showing off her new digs to Lizzie, is the same woman displaying the space and light of her new 1950s refrigerator, the way anyone might show off her new house to a friend. That much hasn't changed.

There's a reason *Pride and Prejudice* is worthy of worship—because it tells the truth. Jane Austen reveals the interior lives of her characters, showing what it means to live in a society: in a marriage, in a family, in a gossipy village. She captures the essence of what it is to be in the thick of a romance, to defend against rivals, to make and regret rash choices, to long for someone you can't have. And she was a little bit mean—the way real people are mean—so there are both heroes and nincompoops. Family is both beloved and annoying. That is Austen's genius, her ability to describe people in all their frailty and humor.

And so if this were a dinner party—and it doesn't matter that it's not, it still makes me the host and you the guest—it would make perfect sense that I'd be thanking you for coming, as I ushered you into the kitchen to find a drink while pressing you to mingle. (Now, I'm Mr. Collins prattling on and dripping something sticky on your sleeve.) Instead, I'll say there are certain novels in this life that keep you perfect company and *Pride and Prejudice* is one of them. I have such affection for the voices and personalities in this book and happily offer this edition, in the hopes that it will befriend a new audience, as well as please its many longtime admirers.

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