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In Jane Austen 2.0, the Heroines And Heroes Friend Each Other

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The Young Seek 'Sense and Sensibility'
On Dating, 'Crazy Parents' Via the Web

BY ARDEN DALE
AND MARY FILON

Ben Kemper, 19, plans to wear a frock coat with cuffs to the annual Jane Austen birthday tea in Boise, Idaho, on Saturday.

The outfit will be "the whole shebang," says Mr. Kemper, who hopes to scare up some yard work so he can pay for the new threads. He says his costume may include riding boots, a cane, gloves and a buttoned vest.

Mr. Kemper is among an unlikely set of fans of the long-dead Ms. Austen—young people. The English novelist best known for "Pride and Prejudice" and "Sense and Sensibility" has been dead since 1817, yet she is drawing a cultish pack of young people, especially young women, known as "Janeites" who are dedicated to celebrating all things Austen.


Other renowned English authors aren't so posthumously popular—at least among the Web set. Ms. Austen counts roughly 89,000 fans on Facebook, compared with 45,000 for Charles Dickens, and just 9,000 for the Brontë sisters.

Young women, in particular, find meaning in Ms. Austen's

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If oil and gas companies are allowed greater access to off-shore areas the increase in government revenues would be large enough to cut government debt by:

a. $140 Million
b. $560 Billion
c. $1.3 Trillion ✓
d. $800 Million

Sources: EIA Interior; December 2008

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In Jane Austen 2.0, Heroines and Heroes Fight Each Other

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work, according to Joan Klingel Ray, author of "Jane Austen for Dummies." They may be "trying to figure out how to find Mr. Right," says Ms. Ray, an American professor at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, and author of "The Charmed Bronte's Jane Eyre" feels antiquated. She finds Jane Austen's writing more relevant to her life. "Marrying for money, crazy parents, dating—these are all basic themes," says Ms. Potter. She has been writing a book about the sandwich table at a recent Austen meeting that drew 200 members.

Lindsey Hanlon, 22, is part of an Austen group at the University of Wyoming, in Laramie, in which members sit for hours over dinner discussing the author's work and give each other quizzes. Earlier this year, during a spring break, they traveled to England for a visit of old Austen haunts, including Bath, where some of her characters dispersed themselves.

"Every girl in the world has had a crush on an inappropriate suitor or the man she sees as above her, or even the local bad boy," says Ms. Hanlon. "Whoever you are, there is a love story for you in Austen."

Ms. Olay, 66, is trying to tap into that passion to ensure that the Austen Society, formed in 1979, endures. In 2006, at the request of her chapter, Conception, 27 members set up a Facebook page. She quickly found that the Web was already a hub of Austen activity.

Using the Web and Facebook, we are able to group members," says Ms. Olay. "They are forming friendships and learning how to plan events."

"See Jane" Baldwin, 31, of Starkville, Miss., created in 2008, "Austen" Book, a Web spoof of Facebook that digitally chronicles the happenings of Elizabeth Bennet and the other characters in "Pride and Prejudice." "When you read her books, you feel like the characters could be with you right now," says Ms. Baldwin. The Austen Society is reaching out to young people in other ways too. For the past three years the society has had a book group that meets at the Brooklyn Bookstore, which Ms. Austen only deplored as author with her own booth at the ultra-info event.

The Juvenilia members take walking tours in lower Manhattan and gather at each other's apartments to watch DVDs of Austen-themed movies such as "Sense and Sensibility," called "I Have Found It." Media companies are tapping into the Austen craze as well. Quirk Books in Philadelphia in 2008 commissioned author Seth Grahame-Smith to write "Pride and Prejudice and Zombies," a novel that adds undead to Ms. Austen's classic novel. The book is slated to become a film next year.

The seeds of the Austen resurgence were sown during the 1990s. In 1995 came two big films and TV adaptations: the BBC miniseries of "Pride and Prejudice" and "Emma," starring Gwyneth Paltrow starred in "The Mrs. Darcy" television series. Ms. Paltrow "is very industrious," says Mr. Firth. Ms. Paltrow now does postdoctoral work in biochemistry at MIT. "In some of the forums, there are throw-downs about who is their favorite Darcy...at one conference an 80-year-old said that Ms. Austen's work is the Web, the Web series at[J]amiegum that plays on the differences between life today and the Austen era.

The two-and-a-half minute webisodes include such titles as "The 200-Year-Old Virgin." Young people, says Ms. Viera Rigler, are into Austen's universe and obsessed with a "normal to normal" says she. "We are a little crazy."

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ONLINE TODAY: Watch the faux movie trailer for "Jane Austen's Fight Club" at WSJ.com/PageOne.