



BOOKS CAN CHANGE US.

How a chance encounter with Jane Austen fuels my giving.

by Shelly Ann Panton



Shelly Ann Panton is a guest writer for the Reading Owls blog. A Jamaican native and tennis mom, you can usually find her cheering (or writing) at tennis games.

Gingerbread nudity was the genesis of my love affair with books. I was probably about five, on a weekly trip to the parish (state) library with my school. We were allowed to spend one hour wandering all over the infant section on our own, choosing whatever books grabbed our fancy, and eventually picking the one we would take home. That glorious day Robert Green* had reached his hand into a stack of books and came

back with the ultimate prize. It was a book about a baker who baked himself a son, and there, on page 8, was a picture of his son, a gingerbread boy, with no clothes on. Score! Although said gingerbread boy was most certainly not anatomically correct, it was the closest any of us had come to nudity in print, and reason enough for all of us to drop our own books and gawk at Robert's. We were soon discovered, relieved of the contraband, and sent back to school in disgrace.

I loved that little library by the sea. It was essentially two rooms connected by a foyer which housed a sadly inadequate number of books in its capacity as Parish Library for the parish of Hanover. But it was so beautiful.

It was white and sparkly and post card perfect against the lovely blue of the Caribbean sea. Each room had great big windows looking directly on to the water, the incredible loveliness of the mixture of sea and sun only slightly marred by the thud of the occasional suicidal sea gull. If only it had more books.

Our library functioned more as a study hall with some books on the shelves. In the adult section, where the big kids gathered to study and flirt during exam time, there were encyclopedias, and some other reference books, and the occasional gem. For me, the shiniest gem of all was the collection of the entire works of Jane Austen, donated by some wonderful angel. I had never even heard of Jane Austen, but one day, bored with my geography homework, I wandered over to some random section and pulled out a book and read this

“It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”

It was such a defining moment in my life. A rubicon of sorts, the day I knew what I liked to read. Before that I read what my friends read. In the infant section of the library we read the Nancy Drews and Hardy Boys (yes, I know they are about boys but we were very progressive girls). Before that we read the Bobbsey Twins and Cherry Ames series and the entire Enid Blyton collection. Eventually I went to Prep School in Montego Bay and in their library I read the Trixie Belden and What Katy Did series. My friends and I passed *Are You There God? It's me, Margaret* back and forth until we ripped the covers, and annoyed the boys by reading *Then Again, Maybe I Won't* and acting all knowledgeable about their problems.

But when I found Jane Austen, I heard the voice of a friend. She was so wonderfully snarky and cloaked it so cleverly in genteel language. She was so observant, elevating the mundane to high art by softly poking fun at long held assumptions. Perhaps it seems unlikely, but that really resonated with thirteen year old me, sitting in the window of a tiny library on the sea in rural Jamaica.





So where did my friendship with Jane take me? It took me to small high level classes at Cornell, where I debated her relevance with lettered professors who first looked askance at my gall, and then impressed with the depth of my knowledge. It made me comfortable in academic and social settings from Ithaca, to Washington to Tokyo, never truly second guessing my right to be wherever I was because years of reading had created a confident critical thinker. Today, it takes me to heated negotiations with powerful lawyers and their wary clients where I must use my powers of observation to determine what they really want, and use my words to convince them that what I am offering is better. I am blessed to be able to use my gift with words to provide for my family.

I know that I am a product of my experiences. I was fortunate to have an indulgent family who understood the value of reading.

They were fortunate to have the time and resources to indulge me. I know that there are other children who grew up very close to me in Jamaica who did not receive this gift. Their communities didn't have a sun dappled library set on the sea, woefully under filled or not. They never met Jane, or her friends Charlotte or George.

But I also know that there is another generation growing up now, and we can have an impact on their lives. I am so excited every time I see a post about Reading Owls. I loved the pictures from the recent grand opening of the library in Clifton, Hanover. I loved the look on the little girls' faces as they read. I know that look. I think it is important to put that look on as many faces as we can. This is why I donate. You can help Reading Owls continue its mission of "creating readers for life" by liking their FB page or following them on Twitter (@thereadingowls), sharing their information with family and friends, and signing up for their quarterly newsletter. You may also donate a book or make a contribution directly from their website. A small act of kindness could truly transform a child's life.