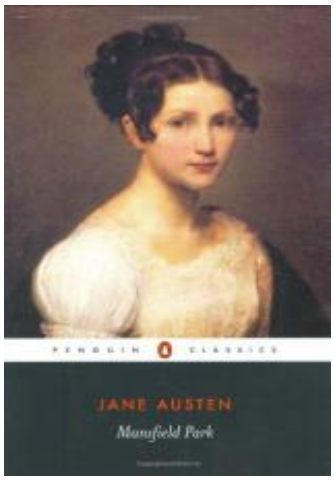
Mansfield Park

by Jane Austen



About the Book

(Excerpted from **The Jane Austen Book Club**)

Mansfield Park was written between 1811 and 1813, and published in 1814. It marks Austen's return to novel writing after an interruption of more than a decade.

Ten-year-old Fanny Price is taken from her impoverished home to the estate of her wealthy aunt and uncle Bertram. There she is tormented by her aunt Norris, disliked by her cousins Tom, Maria, and Julia, and befriended only by her cousin Edmund. Her position is less than a daughter, more like a servant. Years pass. Fanny grows up shrinking and sickly (though very pretty).

While Uncle Bertram is away on business, Henry and Mary Crawford come to stay at the nearby parsonage. The Crawfords, brother and sister, are lively and charming. Both Maria and Julia are taken with Henry. Edmund is equally smitten with Mary.

Amateur theatricals are planned, then cancelled by Uncle Bertram's return. But the rehearsals have already encouraged several damaging flirtations. Maria, humiliated by Henry's lack of real interest, marries Mr. Rushworth, a wealthy buffoon.

Henry then falls in love with shy Fanny. She refuses the advantageous match and, as punishment, is sent back to her parents. Henry pursues her for a time, then has an affair with Maria that results in her disgrace. Edmund's eyes are opened by Mary's casual response to this.

Tom, the eldest Bertram cousin, nearly dies of vice and dissipation; Fanny is fetched back to Mansfield Park to help nurse him. At the end of the book, Edmund and Fanny marry. They seem well suited to each other, though not, as Kingsley Amis has pointed out, the sort of people you would like to have over for dinner.

Discussion Guide

1. **Mansfield Park** was written after a silence of more than a decade. During this period, Austen moved several times, saw the deaths of her father and a potential suitor, and became the dependent old maid we find so often among her more pitiable characters. The Napoleonic Wars continued; England embarked on imperialistic adventures. Austen followed both with interest. Do you see evidence of these things in the novel?

2. At the heart of its plot, **Mansfield Park** has three sisters. What kind of family life do you imagine would account for Mrs. Bertram and Mrs. Norris and Mrs. Price? Find something good to say about Mrs. Norris.

3. Fanny is an Austen heroine who, throughout the course of the book, has nothing to learn. In this she stands in sharp contrast to Emma Woodhouse. Do you like Fanny as well as you like Emma? Less? More?

4. In one of the book's most famous scenes, Fanny sits wilted in the heat at the Rushworth's estate, while the other characters come and go around her. Discuss the ways this epitomizes the entire plot of the book.

5. The various roles played in The Lover's Vows often result in Austen characters who are, under the cover of the play, allowed to act in ways more congruent with their real natures than polite society permits. They perform themselves.

Meanwhile, William H. Galperin suggests that, when Fanny Price insists she cannot act, she is actually demonstrating her "inability to know one is always acting." Galperin speaks of "a fundamental duplicity in which one literally performs one's inability to act."

Think about this until your head explodes.

6. Plato has suggested that one cannot be both a good actor and a good citizen. What do you imagine he meant? Discuss the relevance of this to Mansfield Park.

7. In most books, the villains are identifiable through their mistreatment of the hero/heroine. In Mansfield Park, the Crawfords are among the tiny handful of people who see the value of Fanny Price. Are they ever unkind to her?

Why is Fanny so little moved by their interest and esteem?

In your opinion, is any of this esteem genuine?

8. The Crawfords are superficially the most attractive characters in the book. Where do their virtues become vices? Answer the same question with regard to Fanny and Edmund.

9. Kingsley Amis said, "Edmund and Fanny are both morally detestable and the endorsement of their feelings and behavior by the author . . . makes Mansfield Park an immoral book." Do you agree? Is there any difference in your mind

between Austen herself and the book's narrator?

10. Earlier Austen novels suggest a society in positive transformation; earlier heroines struggle towards the possibility of improvement. In contrast, Mansfield Park is about a society threatened with transformation. Fanny Price makes no positive movement. She protects Mansfield Park by her resistance, by her refusal to change. In the end, the society represented by the estate of Mansfield Park will not and cannot be saved? What in that society seemed valuable to you? Is there anything to regret about its loss?

Author Bio

Though the domain of Jane Austen?s novels was as circumscribed as her life, her caustic wit and keen observation made her the equal of the greatest novelists in any language.

Born the seventh child of the rector of Steventon, Hampshire, on December 16, 1775, Austen was educated mainly at home. At an early age she began writing sketches and satires of popular novels for her family?s entertainment. As a clergyman?s daughter from a well-connected family, she had ample opportunity to study the habits of the middle class, the gentry and the aristocracy. At 21, she began a novel called ?The First Impressions,? an early version of PRIDE AND PREJUDICE. In 1801, on her father?s retirement, the family moved to the fashionable resort of Bath. Two years later she sold the first version of NORTHANGER ABBEY to a London publisher, but the first of her novels to appear in print was SENSE AND SENSIBILITY, published at her own expense in 1811. It was followed by PRIDE AND PREJUDICE (1813), MANSFIELD PARK (1814) and EMMA (1815).

After her father died in 1805, the family first moved to Southampton then to Chawton Cottage in Hampshire. Despite this relative retirement, Jane Austen was still in touch with a wider world, mainly through her brothers; one had become a very rich country gentleman, another a London banker, and two were naval officers. Though her many novels were published anonymously, she had many early and devoted readers, among them the Prince Regent and Sir Walter Scott. In 1816, in declining health, Austen wrote PERSUASION and revised NORTHANGER ABBEY. Her last work, SANDITION, was left unfinished at her death on July 18, 1817.

Austen was buried in Winchester Cathedral. Her identity as an author was announced to the world posthumously by her brother Henry, who supervised the publication of NORTHANGER ABBEY and PERSUASION in 1818.

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Publication Date: April 29, 2003
Paperback: 480 pages
Publisher: Penguin Classics
ISBN-10: 0141439807
ISBN-13: 9780141439808