ReadingGroupGuides
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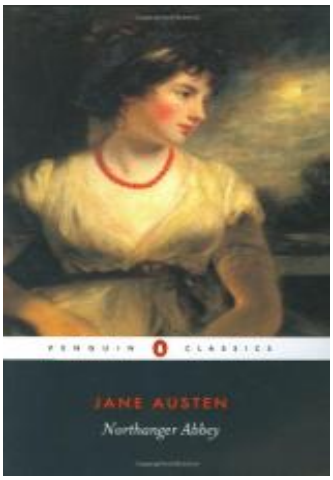
Northanger Abbey

by Jane Austen



About the Book

Northanger Abbey was written in the late 1790s, but published only posthumously. It is the story of a deliberately ordinary heroine named Catherine Morland. The book is divided into two parts. In the first, Catherine travels with family friends, the Allens, to Bath. There she meets two brother-sister pairs --- John and Isabella Thorpe, and Henry and Eleanor Tilney. Her own brother, James, joins them and becomes engaged to Isabella. Catherine is attracted to Henry, a clergyman with witty and unorthodox manners.

General Tilney, father to Henry and Eleanor, invites Catherine to visit them at home; this visit makes up the second half of the book. The General is at once solicitous and overbearing. Under the spell of the gothic novel she has been reading, Catherine imagines he has murdered his wife. Henry discovers this and sets her humiliatingly straight.

Catherine receives a letter from James telling her that Isabella has ended their engagement. General Tilney, upon returning from London, has Catherine thrown out, to make her own way home. It is eventually understood that Catherine and James had been mistaken for people of great wealth, but the situation has been clarified.

Henry is so outraged by his father's behavior that he follows immediately after Catherine and proposes marriage. They cannot proceed without his father's permission, but this is finally given in the happy madness of Eleanor's marriage to a viscount.

Discussion Guide

1. Although **Northanger Abby** was the first book Austen sold, it was one of the last published. Some readers feel that it's obviously an early work without the narrative control Austen was soon to develop. Do you agree? Why or why not?

2. Catherine Morland is clearly a suggestible reader, but her gullibility extends beyond books into the real world. Is the

tendency to think the best of people a trait you admire? Is it a trait you have?
The one character about whom Catherine is inclined to think the worst is General Tilney. Why is this? She is humiliated when Henry realizes how her imagination has run away with her, but how mistaken is she really regarding his general character? Are her powers of imagination more reliable than her powers of observation?

3. Henry Tilney tells Catherine that his father was attached to his mother and greatly afflicted by her death. Do you believe him?

4. Henry, himself, is a controversial hero. Sylvia Warner Townsend has suggested she thinks he's one of Austen's most delightful. Some find him witty and appealingly interested in feminine matters. Others find him condescending and even misogynistic. Ask another reader of **Northanger Abbey** what s/he thinks of Henry and then argue with whatever position s/he takes.
Of his father, Henry says that, given his temperament, "he loved . . .as well as it was possible for him to." How well do you imagine it will be possible for Henry to love? Affectionately? Passionately? Steadfastly?
Why does he choose Catherine and how much in love with her is he?

5. Hidden within Austen's satire on gothic novels is Eleanor Tilney's story. Eleanor has a dead mother, an overbearing father, and ends up married to a viscount. Imagine the book if Austen had chosen Eleanor as the heroine. Would it have been a gothic novel?

6. Northanger Abbey is a book about reading. Much of the plot has to do with the folly of confusing one's own life with the stuff of fictional adventure. But the book also contains a famous Austen defense of novels and novelists, particularly those read and written by women.

a. We are told immediately that Catherine does not object to books so long as "nothing like useful knowledge could be gained from them" and they are "all story and no reflection."
   Escapist fiction continues, in our day, to have a bad reputation. Is that reputation deserved?
b. Austen flatters the reader of **Northanger Abbey** by allowing him/her to see and understand things the heroine does not. It's fun for readers to find that they are smarter than the people in books.
   Have you read books in which you felt you were smarter than the author? Is that also fun?
   Is it possible to like a book if it makes you feel you're not quite smart enough to read it?
   What kind of difficulty level do you like in a book? Think of some books that are just difficult enough for you to enjoy. Think of some books that are too difficult.
c. The romance genre is arguably our own most popular form of fiction. Is the romance genre empowering or damaging to women readers? Do these fictions have real life implications for women?
   Are its antecedents the same novels Austen is poking fun at in Northanger Abbey? Or would you trace its lineage back to Austen herself?
d. What is the role of fiction in your own life? Why do you read it and what do you want from it?

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.

Critical Praise

"These modern editions are to be strongly recommended for their scrupulous texts, informative notes and helpful introductions."

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Publication Date: April 29, 2003
Paperback: 288 pages
Publisher: Penguin Classics
ISBN-10: 0141439793
ISBN-13: 9780141439792