WHAT IS A JANEITE? If someone had asked me that a year ago, I would have blithely reeled off a description of the “typical” Austen enthusiast. After all, as a life-long admirer of the author, I’d rubbed elbows with hundreds of fellow fans at countless Jane-oriented gatherings. But were my assumptions accurate? I had some doubts. As a professional researcher, I knew that anecdotal encounters do not constitute valid data.

In 2008 a prime opportunity arose for taking a more systematic look at this interesting community of Austen readers. The theme for the annual meeting of the Jane Austen Society of North America (JASNA) was to be “Austen’s Legacy: Life, Love, & Laughter.” Believing that Jane’s greatest legacy is her devoted readership, I decided to find out as much as possible about this group of readers. The Jane Austen Survey 2008 was developed to create a fully-rounded portrait of Jane Austen’s current readership, for presentation at the 2008 JASNA Annual General Meeting in Chicago.

Survey arrangements

A major consideration was who should be “allowed” to participate in this Janeite-oriented survey. I did not wish to set the bar overly high. I felt any reader who had persevered all the way through Mansfield Park and Northanger Abbey (as well as the four more accessible novels) had met some sort of minimum requirement, so survey participation was self-limited to those who 1) had read all six major Austen novels, and 2) considered themselves to be “sincere admirers.”

What questions should be posed? I started with what I suspected was the popular view of the “typical Jane Austen fan”: female, librarian, English major, tea drinker, classical music lover, NPR listener—with cats. I wondered how many of these seven stereotypes would prove to be accurate. The survey grew from there into a research instrument.

The Jane Austen Survey 2008 launched at the beginning of the year and ran for five months. One could participate online or via a paper survey. Information on the survey was published in two editions of JASNA News, mailed to all 3,800 members. The spring edition included a coupon to request a paper version of the survey, which was also made available to all JASNA regional organizations. The online version was publicized on the JASNA websites as well as a number of Austen-oriented sites, such as AustenBlog, Yahoo/Janeites, and The Republic of Pemberley. I set my sights on hearing from 1,000 Janeites but feared this might be a difficult goal to achieve. The general public is unenthusiastic about taking surveys, and this particular example was long and complex, with 52 questions, a number of these asking for write-in responses. I had my fingers crossed when I launched the survey on January 15.

Survey participation

To my great surprise and delight, responses poured in. Within ten days, the 1,000-Janeites goal was met and surpassed. In all, 4,501 people participated in The Jane Austen Survey 2008, 95% of these via the online version.

The high percentage of online participants does raise some questions of validity. Most seriously, there was the possibility that overall results were skewed toward younger respondents. In consideration, I looked at two areas, age and Internet access: 1) the median age of participants was 40; 2) a 2008 AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) study determined that 75% of college graduates aged 62 and older are active on the Internet (85% of older survey participants were graduates). And when I compared results by age, I found the opinions of participants aged 20-29 to be strikingly similar to those aged 50-59.

I concluded that the ease and convenience of participating online resulted in a high percentage of computer-literate respondents. It is possible that the opinions of these participant Janeites may differ somewhat from those of “all Janeites” but not because survey takers were disproportionately younger. Since familiarity with technology is the issue here, a case
might be made that the survey results reflect the opinions of the present and future Janeite, rather than the Janeite of the past.

Results Analysis

In addition to results for all participants, responses were cross-referenced to generate reports for three subgroups: gender (males compared to females), age (respondents aged 20-29 compared to those aged 50-59), and nationality. There were no significant differences among nationalities on key questions and relatively few among gender and age subgroups. (Where discrepancies occurred, they are noted in this report.)

Part 1: Participant Demographics. The first half of the survey focused on the survey participant. What portrait emerges from these responses?

Respondents were overwhelmingly female (96%), with a median age of 40. The survey population broke into three equal sectors: 33% aged 29 or younger, 35% aged 30-49, and 32% aged 50 or older. (There were 335 teenagers and 215 respondents aged 70 or over.)

Although the intended focus of this survey was North America, no one who met the qualifications was excluded. Janeites from all parts of the world participated. Ninety percent came from English-speaking nations: 68% from the U. S., 6% from Canada and 16% from the U. K., Australia/New Zealand and Ireland combined. The remainder was comprised of Janeites from Europe; Mexico, Central, and South America; Asia; and Africa.

According to the survey results, Janeites are typically working women/men: 75% listed a current or former career. (Sixteen percent of respondents were students, 9% homemakers or mothers.) More than one-third have had work experience as teachers (20% elementary or high school, 12% college level) or as librarians (12%). Overall, the top ten career fields are education, business administration (manager/HR/secretary, etc.), business services/worker/retail, library/archivist, finance, science/engineering, writing/publishing, medical, arts, law and IT.

Although this career list is extensive, it does not begin to tell the whole story. One of the most intriguing survey results was the wide diversity of Janeite careers. Among the Austen enthusiasts are judges, lobbyists, and U. S. Marines, private investigators, zoo keepers, and puppeteers. Who knew?

Janeites tend to be well-educated: 81% over the age of 20 had a 4-year (or higher) college degree. Almost half had achieved a master’s (33%) or doctorate (12%). The standard was even higher for the oldest participants: 25% of those aged 80 and over had doctorates. Interestingly, a large majority (71%) of respondents did not major in English/Literature.

A number of questions addressed life-style and social issues. Home communities are evenly divided among urban, suburban and small town/rural. Janeite households are slightly more affluent than the U.S. median; 75% had annual income below $100,000. Politically, Janeites are more likely to view themselves as liberal (55%) than conservative (25%), and on the topic of feminism, to have a favorable (67%) rather than unfavorable (11%) opinion. They are fairly evenly divided on religion: 41% said they were religious, 38% not religious.

More participants described themselves as outgoing than shy (40% to 23%). They enjoy multiple hobbies, with more than 50% involved in reading (98%), watching movies (80%), listening to music (72%), attending theater/concerts (61%), walking/yoga/other exercise (60%), visiting museums (60%), and traveling (56% to other countries, 54% within own country). Janeite hobbies go far beyond the ordinary, however, and include flamenco, kite flying, fox-hunting and cloud spotting.

Janeites tend to be well-traveled. More than half the respondents have visited Western Europe (69%), England/Wales/Scotland (68%) or traveled extensively in the U. S. (65%) and Canada (52%). Many have also been to Mexico and the Caribbean. The least-visited area from the survey list is India (4%), followed by Russia (7%), and China (8%). Only 10% have been to Alaska. (Remarkably, 47% of all respondents have visited Austen sites in England, including 40% of U. S. respondents and 53% of Canadians.)

Participants were queried on their “ideal” vacations. The top locations are Europe (especially Italy, France and Greece), the U. K. (England, Scotland), Ireland, and the U. S. (east coast, Hawaii, Alaska). The Caribbean, New Zealand and South America are desired destinations for many. General touring was the most-mentioned activity, followed by walking/hiking, historical activities, cultural activities, beach relaxation, and renting a villa/cottage. Some Janeites have rather unusual vacation desires, such as belly dancing in Cairo, rebuilding an Afghan province, hunting for diamonds in Dubai, or road-tripping with the St. Louis Cardinals.

When Janeites tire of traveling, many might pop into a tearoom. There are a good many more tea-drinking Janeites than coffee fans (63% to 46%). When imbibing socially, 60% choose alcohol: 40% prefer wine (equally red and white), 13% cocktail/whiskey, 6% beer.
When it comes to four-legged companions, tabbies rule. Fifty-eight percent of respondents have pets, with cats edging out dogs (36% to 30%).

How about media? Hands down, Janeites adore their books. Eighty-six percent read at least two a month (33% read five or more). Survey respondents also tend to be knowledgeable about computers. Fifty-seven percent describe themselves as technologically savvy (only 1% were clueless), and the Internet is the most common news resource (for 36% of the group, compared to 26% for TV, 22% newspaper, 14% radio).

Mysteries beat out all other types of books as prime non-Austen reading matter, with 29% relishing this genre. Second place goes to historical fiction (15%), then non-fiction history, biography, fantasy, contemporary fiction and poetry. Janeites also ranged wide in their choice of authors: 63 writers received at least 10 votes. Those with the most fans were: Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Mrs. Gaskell, J. K. Rowling, J. R. R. Tolkien, William Shakespeare, Anthony Trollope, Georgette Heyer, and Agatha Christie.

On the topic of radio, 48% of U.S. participants said they frequently listened to NPR (National Public Radio). Turning to TV, Janeites are slightly more likely to be moderate viewers (two plus hours) than minimum viewers (one hour or less).

And what’s on the iPod? It’s anyone’s guess: Janeites have wide-ranging musical tastes. The largest sector (29%) listens most frequently to classical music, but almost as many prefer rock, with pop music in third place.

Part 2: Janeite Land. The second half of the survey looked into the participant’s relationship to Jane Austen and her work.

Just over half of the respondents fell for Jane at an early age, 17 or younger. Thirteen percent were 12 or younger! Interestingly, males were more likely to come to Jane later in life, post-college. How did Janeites first come to appreciate Jane? The most common sparks were reading an Austen novel on one’s own (30%) or seeing a film or TV production (29%). (Younger respondents were more likely to cite the film/TV experience.) Introduction in class (16%) and recommendation by a friend or relative (14%) were also influential.

About one-third of participants typically read one or two of the novels annually, and about the same number read three or more. Eleven percent read all six every year! Just under half of respondents had read all or most of Austen’s other works (letters, Sanditon, Lady Susan, etc.). Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that 62% considered themselves well-informed about Jane and her period (6% felt uninformed). The Jane-related material most popular with Janeites includes biographies (top choice was Tomalin’s Jane Austen: A Life), period-background works (Le Faye’s Jane Austen: The World of Her Novels), Regency-period sequels (Aidan’s Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman series), and modern sequels (Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary).

When the difficult but inevitable “choose your favorite” questions were posed, Pride and Prejudice reigned, but perhaps not quite as supreme as one might expect. Pride and Prejudice is the favorite novel of 53% of respondents, Elizabeth Bennet the favorite heroine of 58%, and Mr. Darcy the favorite hero of 51%. Second place goes to Persuasion (top choice of 28%), trailed by Emma (7%), Sense and Sensibility (5%), Mansfield Park (4%), and Northanger Abbey (4%). In all, 40% cite Northanger Abbey as least favorite although younger respondents like it more than older ones.

As favorite heroine Lizzie is trailed by Anne (24%), Elinor (7%), Emma (5%), Fanny (3%), Catherine (2%) and Marianne (1%). Voted least-favorite are Fanny (35%) and Catherine (25%). Younger participants are less likely than older ones to appreciate Anne and dislike Catherine. Runners up to Darcy were Wentworth (17%), Knightley (14%), Tilney (10%), Brandon (5%), Ferrars (1%) and Bertram (1%). Interestingly, males are a good bit less likely to choose Darcy as their favorite hero. The least-liked hero by some measure is Edmund Bertram (40%).

Janeites were also asked to choose a quite different kind of favorite. Favorite bad boys? Wickham aces out Willoughby (33% to 28%), followed by Henry Crawford (16%), Frank Churchill (10%), William Elliot (7%) and General Tilney (6%). It’s noteworthy that males look somewhat more favorably on Willoughby. When Janeites weighed in on the very worst parents in the novels, Sir Walter Elliot took the prize (54%), followed by Mr. and Mrs. Price (16%) and Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram (15%). Least objectionable is Mrs. Dashwood (2%).

There are four comic characters who especially delight respondents: Mrs. Bennet (74% voted her “a favorite”), Mr. Collins (70%), Admiral Croft (56%), and the inimitable Miss Bates (50%).

Janeites revel in the spate of Austen-related movies and TV productions, with 86% feeling they are a “good thing” overall for appreciation of Jane. It seems 1995 was a very good year for the genre, producing the top three choices: Pride and Prejudice (Ehle/Firth, favorite of 62%), Persuasion (Root/Hines, 12%), and Sense and Sensibility (Thompson/Grant, 9%). Next in line are two other productions of Pride and Prejudice (2005 and 1980), followed by a 1996 Emma (Paltrow/Northam).

Although three in four survey respondents have visited Austen-related websites, only one in four has joined his or
The upshot is that, after sifting through all this survey data, I can no longer sum up the “typical Janeite” in a few easy phrases. Yes, the results do reveal a number of truisms about the Janeite community. We are generally college-educated, enthusiastic readers, well-traveled, etc.—likely similar in these aspects to many other literature-oriented groups. But of the seven Janeite stereotypes at the top of my survey question list, five were not attributes of the average Austen fan. Just 8% are librarians, 29% English majors, 29% classical-music lovers, 48% NPR listeners, and only 36% have cats. (Janeites are typically female and mostly tea drinkers.)

When someone recently asked what surprised me most about the survey results, I had to cite the diversity of our community. I now know we are young, we are old, we are in between—in equal measures. We are teachers and librarians and book editors, as expected, but also judges, truck drivers, puppeteers, oceanographers, and zoo keepers. We listen to Elvis as well as Mozart while living in Akron, New Delhi, Tokyo, and Vancouver. There is only one thing that connects everyone in this group: we all have a special place in our heart for Jane. And in my view, that is the most important part of the anatomy of a Janeite.

NOTES

1. This paper provides a partial summary of survey results. To request a full results report from The Jane Austen Survey 2008, please send an e-mail to: janeaustensurvey@earthlink.net

2. Some interesting Janeite jobs: acrostic compiler, air traffic controller, architecture librarian, asbestos claims adjustor, barista, bartender, biostatistician, bookbinder, church musician, civil rights investigator, classical ballet teacher, commercial pilot, commercial truck driver, composer, cosmetic chemist, deputy sheriff, dog walker, Dominican friar, eBay seller, farmer, folk artist, funeral director, genetic researcher, gymnast, hat maker, horse trainer, hypnotherapist, intelligence officer, judge, lace maker, lobbyist, massage therapist, mechanical engineer, midwife, molecular biologist, nanny, oceanographer, opera singer, pastry chef, pipe-organ builder, plant pathologist, poet, prison chaplain, private investigator, puppeteer, roofer, security guard, Senator’s assistant, soldier, tennis teacher, theatrical costumer, tourist guide, turf accountant, TV news anchor, union organizer, wedding planner, window dresser, and zoo keeper.

3. Some interesting Janeite hobbies: anti-nuclear activism, cartooning, casino gambling, classic cars, cloud spotting, coaching Lego robotics, excavating, flamenco, football scout for major college, fox-hunting, greyhound racing, healing, Napoleonic historical reenactment, kite flying, fencing, performing Gilbert & Sullivan, spinning wool, sports car racing, synchronized swimming, target shooting, witchcraft, and working with parrots.

4. Some interesting Janeite holiday choices: belly dancing in Cairo, caving in Slovenia, climbing mountains in Japan, finding love in Prague, hunting for diamonds in Dubai, visiting the oracle at Delphi in Greece, staying in an Orthodox Christian convent, practicing Kendo in Japan, rebuilding an Afghan province, rescuing sea turtles in Panama, riding an elephant in India, road-tripping with the St. Louis Cardinals, seeing high crosses in the Hebrides, smelling lavender in Provence, surfing in Indonesia, tango lessons in Argentina, visiting the great libraries of the world, watching test cricket, seeing wild flowers in the Pyrenees, working on a dude ranch in Wyoming, and making a World War I tour of Belgium, France and England.

5. Favorite Austen-related works:

Austen letters: Jane Austen’s Letters edited by Deirdre Le Faye and My Dear Cassandra, selected letters by Penelope Hughes-Hallett.

Biographies: Jane Austen: A Life by Claire Tomalin, Becoming Jane Austen by Jon Spence, Jane Austen by Carol Shields, and Jane Austen: A Family Record by Deirdre Le Faye.


Regency sequels: Fitzwilliam Darcy, Gentleman series by Pamela Aidan, Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife by Linda Berdoll, Mr. Darcy’s Diary series by Amanda Grange, Darcy’s Story by Janet Aylmer, Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen by Syrie James, and Mr. Darcy’s Daughters series by Elizabeth Aston.


Mysteries: The Jane Austen mystery series by Stephanie Barron and the Suspense and Sensibility (etc.) series by Carrie Bebris.

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