



FLATIRON  
BOOKS  
NEW YORK

# *Miss Austen*

## Reading Group Guide

Welcome to the Reading Group Guide for *Miss Austen*. Please note: In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal important aspects of the plot of this novel—as well as the ending. If you have not finished reading *Miss Austen*, we respectfully suggest that you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.

1. Cassandra Austen is perhaps most famous (or infamous) for having destroyed many of her sister Jane's personal papers, including letters and manuscripts, after her death. After reading this novel, do you sympathize with Cassandra's actions? Do you believe, like her, that personal details about her sister are "none of posterity's business," or do readers and scholars have a right to know more about the lives of famous figures like Jane Austen?
2. The epigraph of *Miss Austen* is from *Persuasion*: "Men have had every advantage over us in telling their own story...The pen has been in their hands." How does this novel rewrite the story? Would you consider it to be feminist?
3. Jane's (and other characters') letters are sprinkled throughout the novel. What do they add to the story that couldn't be conveyed through third-person narration?
4. In the prologue, we see Tom's proposal to Cassandra. What sort of story does that set us up to expect, and how are our expectations subverted? How is the idea of marriage being their "one possible happy ending" complicated?
5. Why does Cassy vow never to marry anyone but Tom, despite his protests? Do you agree with her "small epiphany" later in the novel that "it never had been the wilful act of a foolish young woman, but instead the centrepiece of her whole life's design"?
6. Reading one of Mary's letters, Cassandra is devastated by its account of her reaction to Tom's death, which is very different from Cassandra's own memory: "Cassandra saw now, understood for the first time, the enormity of the task she had lately set herself: how impossible it was to control the narrative of one family's history." Why do you think Cassandra is so upset? Do you think she succeeds in controlling her family's narrative? What is lost and gained in her "editing" of Jane's legacy?
7. In Sidmouth, Cassy and Anna go hunting for fossils with Henry Hobday. For Cassy, the fossils are symbolic: "She would hate to be dug up and pored over some time in the future." Why is Cassy so protective of her (and Jane's) privacy? Do you feel similarly, or would you like to leave a record behind?

8. Cassandra reflects: “A single woman should never outlive her usefulness. It was simple bad manners.” What does she mean by “usefulness”? What challenges do the single women in this novel face? Are any of those challenges still present for single women today?
9. Discuss this line: “For whoever looked at an elderly lady and saw the young heroine she once was?” Did your view of Cassy/Cassandra change depending on her age? Why do you think there are so few depictions of older main characters in literature?
10. For Cassandra, there is “no closer bond on this earth” than sisterhood. How is that relationship portrayed in *Miss Austen*? How does it differ from other forms of female friendship?
11. Cassandra reflects: “Jane’s story and her own could not be separated: they were bound tight together to form one complete history. On the fortunes of the other, each life had turned.” How would her and Jane’s lives have been different had either or both of them married? What role does Cassandra play in Jane’s writing life and success?
12. Isabella’s relationship with John Lidderdale, the town doctor, loosely follows the plot of Austen’s novel *Persuasion*. Were you surprised to learn of their romance? What obstacles did they face in being together? How does Cassandra’s misreading of Isabella’s life parallel her fears about how people will misread her and Jane’s lives?
13. Dinah tells Cassandra: “The difference between you and me, Madam...is *my* meddling’s done all to the good.” What do you make of Dinah’s character? Why do you think she feels so invested in Isabella’s fate?
14. Dinah says of Eliza Fowle: “She was a perfect woman, my mistress – too perfect, as I see it...Perfection brings no end of trouble. Mrs. Fowle would keep her thoughts to herself, which is a daft way to go on, if anyone wants my opinion.” What does she mean? Do you have sympathy for Eliza?
15. What is your favorite Jane Austen novel? What similarities does *Miss Austen* share with those classics, and how does it differ? Were you surprised by any aspects of Gill Hornby’s portrait of Jane and Cassandra, based on your own preconceptions of them?