Baker Street Readers

Great reads for all ages

'Your little cousin cannot help being dull and stupid.'

At the tender age of ten, Fanny Price moves from her poor family home to live with her wealthy cousins at Mansfield Park. Settling into this proud family is only the first of many challenges she will have to face.

Can Fanny, uneducated and inexperienced, win any respect or love, or will the spiteful Mrs Norris turn everybody against her?

When plays, balls and marriage proposals challenge Fanny's judgement, will she be strong enough to do what is right? When jealousy, duty and flattery challenge Fanny's heart, will it be strong enough to guide her towards true love?

Just how strong is Fanny Price?

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- BBC R4, Open Book

MANSFIELD PARK
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TEACHER'S INSPECTION ONLY

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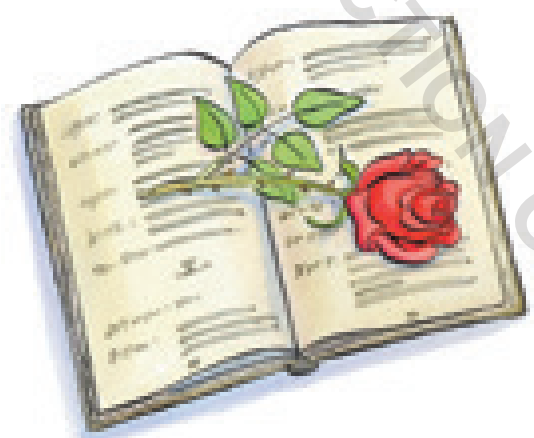
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THE CHARACTERS



Fanny Price

Fanny is a lonely, frightened guest in her uncle's stately home. Is she as weak as others think, or does she have surprising inner strength?



Edmund Bertram

Edmund is Fanny's kindest cousin. Can he make her happy, or will he destroy her happiness forever?



Julia and Maria Bertram

Sir Thomas's beautiful, proud daughters. Will they bring honour or shame to themselves and their family?



Mrs Norris

Fanny's bitter aunt is determined to keep Fanny in her place. What harm will be caused by her spiteful interference?



Sir Thomas Bertram

Sir Thomas is wealthy, proud, and rather frightening. Although he loves his children, does he really know them?



Henry Crawford

Henry is a terrible flirt with a dangerously cold heart. Whose heart will he break? Surely not his own.



Mary Crawford

Mary is beautiful, lively, and determined to marry well. How far can she deceive Edmund? How strong is her influence over him?

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MANSFIELD PARK

'Your little cousin cannot help being dull and stupid,' explained Mrs Norris, looking fondly at her beautiful teenage nieces.

The elder girl, Maria, was still too shaken by her latest discovery to be silenced so easily. 'But she can't speak any French, or draw a map of Europe!'

'And she can't even name all the kings and queens of England in chronological order,' exclaimed Julia, 'which I'm quite sure I could do at the age of ten.'

'As usual, you are both right,' conceded their aunt. 'She is indeed terribly slow, and has not been blessed with your intelligence, which is not surprising considering her background.' Both girls nodded. Mrs Norris continued. 'It is right that Fanny should be less accomplished than you. Your father is Sir Thomas Bertram, whereas hers is a drunken sailor. Your mama

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and papa are very kind to have offered to bring her up, but she is not a Bertram. There should still be a difference between you. Fanny must know her place. You will never be equals.'

The fortunes of the three sisters – Lady Bertram, Mrs Norris, and Fanny's mother Frances – had been decided by their choices of husband. Julia and Maria Bertram's mother had made an excellent match; Mrs Norris had done well enough, and still enjoyed a sufficient income although her husband was dead. Fanny's mother, it was generally agreed, had married beneath her. When Sir Thomas Bertram offered to raise his eldest niece in his grand country house at Mansfield Park, Fanny's mother was delighted.

Two weeks after their cousin's arrival, Julia and Maria had lost interest in her. Fanny, painfully shy, was afraid of everybody and missed her home terribly. With Mrs Norris's advice inflating their vanity, the two sisters

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neglected Fanny. Although they did not deliberately mean to be unkind, they failed to show her any compassion.

Poor Fanny was as unhappy as it was possible to be. 'You ought to be more grateful,' chastised Mrs Norris when she saw Fanny's tears. Miles from her family and all she had ever known, thrown amongst those who did not love her, Fanny cried herself to sleep every night in her cold room.

One morning, Julia and Maria's younger brother Edmund found Fanny crying alone on the attic stairs. 'My dear little cousin, what can be the matter?' he asked, sitting beside her and gently putting his arm around her shoulders. Through her sobs, Fanny confessed to Edmund how terribly she missed her family, how frightened she was of everybody at Mansfield Park, and how guilty she felt because she was unhappy in spite of their kindness in giving her a home. 'Most of all,'

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Back in time

Mansfield Park is a controversial novel. Some readers find it too moralising, whilst others enjoy the fact that Jane Austen engages with a wider world than in most of her novels. Responses to Fanny Price herself differ too. She is considered by some readers to be Jane Austen's least interesting heroine, by others the most complex of them all.

Fanny Price's adoption by her wealthy uncle would not have been unusual at the time. The practice helped to alleviate poverty for less well off families, and greatly increased the prospects of the child in question. However, Fanny will not inherit any of the Bertrams' estate. If she does not marry well, she will eventually be poor.

In reading any of Jane Austen's novels, it is important to understand the relationship between marriage and wealth. Women of the Bertrams' class were not expected to work for a living. Marrying a wealthy man was the most respectable way to gain independence and achieve comfort. Being from a poor family, Fanny can best secure her future comfort by marrying well. This is why everybody thinks she should marry Henry. By sending her to Portsmouth, Sir Thomas probably

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wants to remind her of her poor background, and show her that she may be poor again if she does not accept Henry. Mary Crawford wants to improve her own financial comfort through marriage. This is why she does not want to marry a clergyman.

It was common practice for younger sons to become clergymen. A university degree was the only requirement. At the time *Mansfield Park* was written, people were beginning to feel that clergymen should have some spiritual conviction. Jane Austen's portrayal of Edmund suggests that she shares this opinion.

Jane Austen engages with more contemporary issues in *Mansfield Park* than in her other novels. Sir Thomas's trip to Antigua raises the uncomfortable matter of the slave trade, which had been abolished just four years before the book was written. Much of the Bertrams' wealth has been dependent upon slavery. Jane Austen also tackles new values and fashions. Fanny's nature suggests that Jane Austen did not agree with all aspects of the 'progress' of society. Amateur dramatics are a good example of this. It was becoming fashionable to put on plays, but Jane Austen clearly disapproves of the pastime.

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