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CSCL CELEBRATES ALL THINGS AUSTEN FOR AUTHOR'S 250TH

FOX CHAPEL, PA – "I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of anything than of a book!" – Jane Austen, "Pride & Prejudice."

Cooper-Siegel Community Library (CSCL) is slated to host *Celebrate Jane Austen*, a new, two-part series honoring the iconic late author, from 7 to 8:30 p.m. Aug. 7 and 14. The series marks what would have been Austen's 250th birthday.

Hosted by Squirrel Hill resident and Pittsburgh Regional Coordinator of the Jane Austen Society of North America (JASNA) Allison Thompson, *Part I: Pride and Prejudice and Popularity*, is a deep dive into the 1813 novel and its beloved status among the Austen fandom, known as "Janeites" or "Austenites."

"I'll explore some of the novel's key themes, as well as explain why Mr. Darcy is not a lord and why girls needed to choose their husbands carefully. We'll then take a look at some of Austen's fans and non-fans – both Charlotte Bronte and Mark Twain famously disliked her works," Thompson said. "We'll explore the modern fandom, including dragons, wet shirts, thong underwear, clenched fists and more. There's so much more."

Part II: Jane Austen's Life, Times, and Legacy will focus more on Austen's connections to key events of her lifetime (1775-1817), such as the Napoleonic Wars and the slave trade abolition; Austen's family tree; and her uneventful, small-town life.

"She was well aware of events and opinions of the day, and more of these crept into her writing than many readers realize," Thompson said. "The battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo, the dreadful Prince Regent – they're all connected, however tangentially, to her writing."

CSCL Information Services Department Head Kelley Beeson said she's excited to delve into Austen's world through Thompson, who "comes highly recommended as an enthusiastic Janeite."

"Jane Austen is so beloved, and her stories continue to find new audiences and new iterations. I love providing our community with opportunities to learn more about literature and authors," Beeson said. "Austen's life and plethora of interesting retellings and re-interpretations of her stories are endlessly fascinating. Her stories – full of compelling characters, indicting social commentary and history – continue to speak to modern audiences."

Thompson, who recently retired as an administrator from the University of Pittsburgh, is an independent scholar specializing in girls' and women's 1930s fiction, and has authored various papers on Austen and her fandom.

Her most recent piece, "Jane Austen, Dragon Rider: Pride & Prejudice in Fantasy Fan Fiction," appeared in JASNA's online journal, "Persuasions On-Line." Thompson's latest book, "Dances from Jane Austen's

Assembly Rooms," is a collection of country dance tunes and figures from Austen's music books, as well as other popular music of her time, with essays on period dance.

In addition to managing an active JASNA membership, Thompson is also a folk musician and English country dance teacher. In October, she will join 800 fellow Janeites in Baltimore for JASNA's Annual General Meeting, which she dubbed "Comic-Con for Austen Lovers."

"Many people, influenced by the movies, think of Austen as 'the mother of chick lit,' which annoys me for several reasons – not least of which is the denigration of romances as being for women only and, therefore, less valuable than other genres," Thompson said. "It is also not true in the sense that, while true love is the reward that Austen gives to those characters who have learned valuable lessons about themselves, her primary goal was both comedic and satirical."

Thompson said first-time Austen readers often don't understand that the author pre-dates the "concept of feminism."

"While in many ways she supported the status quo of society of her time, she was angrily critical of some of the conventions of the time that disenfranchised women and girls and left them at the mercy of greedy relatives or strangers," she said. "Austen is considered to be the first writer who deliberately wrote to be re-read. You cannot pick up all the intricacies of plot and character in one reading. This is part of what makes her novel's endlessly fascinating."

There's still time to register for *Celebrate Jane Austen: Parts I & II*. Interested patrons should visit <https://coopersiegel.librarycalendar.com/event/jane-austen-celebration-32656> for more information, or email Thompson at allison.1775.thompson@gmail.com; or Beeson at beesonk3@coopersiegelcommunitylibrary.org.

Thompson hopes attendees will take away from her "fun, funny and informative" talks a "greater appreciation that Austen's works are more complicated, nuanced and funnier than they may have thought."

"Hopefully," she said, "they will be inspired to check out one of her works on their way out of the library so that they can, in the words that appear on many T-shirts and mugs, 'Keep Calm and Carry On Reading Jane Austen.'"

For more information about Cooper-Siegel Community Library, including upcoming programming, visit www.coopersiegelcommunitylibrary.org.

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