

# First-edition *Pride and Prejudice* wows viewers

Original copy of classic novel worth \$250,000 gives literary historians and librarians new insight into life of women writers in the 19th century

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"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man, in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

This famous line, beginning Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, is written in vintage type inside a rare original copy on display at the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library at the University of Alberta.

The book will sit on display for the next week in the small but impressive library in the basement of Rutherford South, in celebration of the 200th year since the story was first published.

**"In many ways these books, these women writers, were trying to get their readers to re-imagine the way women could live and be in the world."**

LINDA QUIRK  
BRUCE PEEL ASSISTANT SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARIAN

The captivating tale of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet has been read for generations — two equally stubborn individuals with negative perceptions about each other, based on their own pride and prejudice. Austen's clever writing takes the reader into their lives through a series of mishaps, before Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy eventually move past their flaws and

develop a romance.

This particular edition on display was printed in London in 1813 as a set of three volumes, all in remarkably good condition.

"We don't actually know how the book was acquired, but we do know that it came to the (circulating) collection about 25 years ago," said Robert Desmarais, head of the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library.

"Jeannine Green was the former head of Special Collections and she was just doing some weeding, so she was in the Rutherford North Library going through books and discovered that this was in the open stacks."

Because of the limited space in the Special Collections library, sometimes books dating after the 18th century can still be catalogued under a regular collection.

The books are now bound with marble boards where leather was once attached to the spine and corners of the outer cover.

Local period bookbinder and book restorer Alex McGuckin also crafted a beautiful casing for all three volumes using traditional materials. This book plating was commissioned as a memorial for U of A English professor Bruce Stovel, an Austen scholar who passed away suddenly in 2007.

First edition copies of this book have been known to sell for nearly \$250,000, as opposed to the approximate 18 pence it would have sold for back when it was published.

Bruce Peel Assistant Special Collections Librarian Linda Quirk noted those who were part of an emerging middle class and higher up on the social hierarchy would



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have purchased these books two centuries away.

"Books were quite expensive then ... decades later, when Dickens became popular, part of why Charles Dickens sold so well is because his books were available in parts that were more affordable," Quirk said.

She said one of the reasons Austen's work is still revered is because it reflects a time when women were emerging as major writers, such as Mary Shelley with her masterpiece, *Frankenstein*.

Both these authors published under a male pseudonym in order to get their work published in a

male-dominated publishing industry.

"Each major character in this book is not only not a perfect, beautiful sort of formal person that women were supposed to be in some way at that point of time — she was a truly flawed character — but also one who's very smart and very well motivated to come take charge of her own life," Quirk explained.

"In many ways, these books, these women writers, were trying to get their readers to re-imagine the way women could live and be in the world."

Not only is the public allowed to view the book, but they can also

turn the pages themselves — provided they remain in the library and take extra caution while reading through the book, especially ensuring their hands are clean.

The book has generated such an interest from the public that waiting lists have been drawn up to view it. Quirk said for some people, it has been "almost a religious thing," noting how moved some were by being able to hold and experience an original copy.

"From our perspective, first edition means something. It means that you're touching history," Desmarais said.

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