

under the window. It would be nice to sit in it. I rearranged the sofa and brought the laptop over. I sat down and the little red cross was replaced by a single bar, fading in and out. I stood on the sofa. The bar stopped winking. I sat down. The red cross came back. Bugger. I stared at the manuscript for a while.

By mid-afternoon I realised that anyone watching through the window might be forgiven for thinking a mad woman had moved into the village. I had written nothing, but had succeeded in inventing a new fitness regime which comprised standing on the sofa, holding the laptop above my head upside down, watching until the red cross turned into a bar, then sitting down again. When this became too repetitive, periods of faffing with the wood burning stove, waving at hikers and boiling the kettle added variety. All I needed was a three month old piece of cheese on the carpet. I was on a writing retreat – in *Shangri-La*. Right.

Next day I needed to take the situation in hand. I spent the morning masquerading as a furniture removal firm. The sofa and dining table switched places. With a little judicious placing of tourist brochures under the table legs, I was able to gain a flat surface with enough height to get a steady single bar on the wi-fi connection, if I placed the laptop half on the table and half on the window sill. Three sofa cushions on a dining chair brought me into line with the keyboard and screen. It wasn't as if I actually had to be on the Internet. I was away from the email, the chat groups, all the distractions. That was the point. Just as long as I got rid of that irritating red cross. I stared at my manuscript. I looked at the bar on my wi-fi connection, feeling smug. I fuffed with the wood burning stove and boiled the kettle a few times. I went to bed.

By the afternoon of day three, I'd settled into a routine. Stove, bar, kettle; kettle, bar, stove. If I said it in a Tommy Cooper accent it sounded productive, especially sitting on the pile of cushions. Outside it remained steadfastly sunny, and waving at hikers was still an optional extra. At nightfall, I caved in, clicked the *connect* button on my laptop and collected my email. Two offers of cut price Viagra and a free tenner

on the bingo. I heaved a sigh of relief and got the first good night's sleep since I arrived.

After breakfast on day four, I realised something. It wasn't the Internet that was stopping me writing. It wasn't housework, or my job, or even the blasted wood burning stove. The only thing stopping me writing was me stressing about not writing. It was another sunny day so I went for a walk, a mile across country to Morecambe Bay. I walked on the beach, found two pubs (closed) and a Farm Shop with an irresistible cake counter. By the time I scaled the pile of cushions back to my perch I had composed a 400 word flash fiction about Manchester tarts.

Day five was taken up sightseeing. I started early, had morning coffee in Grange-over-Sands, visited a Buddhist temple and ended up, late afternoon, at Dove Cottage. I hadn't thought about writing all day. On the drive home, that completely new angle on chapter 19 that had been bothering me for weeks suddenly popped into my head. By the time I opened my laptop it had crystallised and I was up writing until three in the morning.

During the rest of the two week break, I managed to almost complete the rewrite and sketch out three new short stories. I also took time out to meet a local friend and see more of the lake district. Beech Cottage was the perfect place to stay, and just what I needed. All I had to do was understand that in order to go on a successful writing retreat, it is necessary, sometimes, to retreat from writing.

Jo Reed lives and writes in the Southwest of England. She is the author of the *Blood Dancers* series of novels, published by Wild Wolf Publishing. Jo won the Daily Telegraph travel writing award in 2009, and her short stories have appeared in many national magazines, including *Mslexia*, *The People's Friend* and *Lancashire Magazine*. Her next *Blood Dancers* novel, *Malim's Legacy* is due for publication in late 2011/2012, and she is currently working on a fourth novel.

For details of the holiday cottage Jo stayed in, email editor@wordswithjam.co.uk

Keeping up with the Janes

Austenproject on Twitter by Clair Humphries

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Jane Austen parodies, sequels and spin-offs have been done to death. Even die-hard Darcy fans like me have to admit that, zombies aside, an original take on Austen's world of Regency romance is pretty much impossible. Or so I thought – until I signed up to the Austenproject, a collaborative story written in tweets by fans from across the globe. Using the hashtag #A4T, writers book fifteen minute slots every Tuesday, during which they can indulge their 'inner Jane' fantasies and move the plot of the Austen-inspired story forward as they see fit. For some, this has meant staying faithful to favourite characters and themes, while others have been slightly more – well – *subversive*.

The creators of the project – Adam Spunberg and Lynn Shepherd – both know a thing or two about Austen. Adam is a writer, film critic and fan whose flair for social media has inspired the project and its followers. Equally inspiring is Lynn, the award-winning author of *Murder at Mansfield Park*, an Agatha-Christie style whodunnit based on the classic novel. Between them, their enthusiasm has prompted over fifty writers worldwide to participate in the story. Entitled *A Ball at Pemberley*, it is a truly democratic process, uniting published writers and novices alike.

I've always found Austen fans (or 'Janeites' as we say in the trade!) to be a warm and friendly bunch, and the Austenproject reaffirms this, with writers of all abilities being welcomed into the demure, muslin-clad bosom of the #A4T family.

The story reflects the diverse writing styles and interests of its contributors. As you would expect, Mr Darcy regularly takes centre stage in a plot littered with love trysts, intrigues and smouldering suitors on horseback. The backdrop of Pemberley provides all the Regency amusements an Austen heroine could desire, whether it be taking a turn on the pianoforte, or dancing with a handsome, brooding stranger. Austen is known for her dry wit and arch humour, and this is reflected in #A4T; moments of farce, fantasy and outlandish Gothic horror co-exist with more traditional plotlines and themes. Even celebrity crushes pop up in the narrative as rakish versions of Colin Firth and Hugh Grant regularly re-appear, wreaking havoc with the affections of female admirers. These twists and turns in an often surreal plot may sound confusing, but there is a structure to it. Each week, contributors vote in polls to determine future storylines and new ideas are discussed as a group, often via email.

For me, the Austenproject is a great example of how social media can enhance writers' lives. It's great fun, creative and has helped me build a new network of writing 'friends,' many of whom have blogs and websites to link to. The project has also created a bit of a media stir, leading to various online news articles and interviews with BBC radio. So, Dear Reader, why not take a look yourself and read *A Ball at Pemberley* on Twitter at #A4T? You'll be in excellent and most agreeable company.

Read the whole story at:
www.austenproject.com
Twitter hashtag #A4T

Clair Humphries writes humorous fiction and contributed to the Jane Austen-themed anthology 'Dancing With Mr Darcy' edited by Sarah Waters (Honno). She lives with her own Mr Darcy in Kent.

