All lovers of Jane Austen, the most knowledgeable as well as those who have just discovered her, will have much to learn from these modest, searching, and wonderfully perceptive essays.

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This volume presents an exhilarating and insightful collection of essays on Jane Austen – distilling the author's deep understanding and appreciation of Austen's works across a lifetime. The volume is both intra- and inter-textual in focus, ranging from perceptive analysis of individual scenes to the exploration of motifs across Austen's fiction.

Full of astute connections, these lively discussions hinge on the study of human behaviour – from family relationships to sickness and hypochondria – highlighting Austen's artful literary techniques and her powers of human observation.

Jane Austen: Reflections of a Reader by (the late) Nora Bartlett is a brilliant contribution to the field of Jane Austen studies, both in its accessible style (which preserves the oral register of the original lectures), and in its foregrounding of the reader in a warm, compelling and incisive conversation about Austen's works. As such, it will appeal widely to all lovers of Jane Austen, whether first-time readers, students or scholars.

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Those who wrongly categorize Jane Austen as a writer with a narrow compass—‘3 or 4 Families in a Country Village’, as she teasingly said of herself—must have failed to notice the significance in her novels of the global phenomenon that is the weather.¹ What reader has not shuddered over the prospect of a ‘wet Sunday evening’ at Mansfield Park, like the one evoked in Chapter xlvii, even more perhaps than at the confession to Fanny that takes place that night, of the details of Edmund’s final sad interview with Mary Crawford?² And all of Elizabeth Bennet’s many admirers will have delighted in her ‘crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles’ to arrive at Netherfield, ‘“her petticoat, six inches deep in mud”’ (I vii 36; I viii 39), on her errand of mercy to sister Jane.

But it is in Emma that the weather is allowed to make the most difference to people’s behaviour: consider the hot day at Donwell in Chapter xlii which renders Mrs. Elton speechless and brings out Frank Churchill’s wicked temper, or the following day at Box Hill where perfect weather wreaks almost universal wretchedness and havoc. And is it not just hearing about the high wind at a water party at Weymouth that starts that ‘very dear part of Emma, her fancy’ (II viii 232) speculating on Jane Fairfax’s relationship with Mr. Dixon—while in fact it may have been that same ‘sudden whirling round of something or other among the sails’ (II I 171) that originally directed the wayward eye of Frank Churchill toward the lowly Miss Fairfax?

Like most of Jane Austen’s novels, Emma has a central action which unfolds over about a year, and therefore takes its characters through a

¹ Letters, p. 275.
² Austen characterizes the wet Sunday as: ‘the very time of all others when if a friend is at hand the heart must be opened and every thing told’ (III xvi 524).
winter: *Northanger Abbey*’s action is the most compressed, and nearly misses winter out, beginning after the Christmas holidays which introduced James Morland to the Thorpes, but in *Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, Emma* and *Persuasion* the action begins in the autumn and covers much of the ensuing year; *Mansfield Park*’s main action begins with the summer arrival of the Crawfords at Mansfield Parsonage, but continues for almost a year, including of course the Christmas when Edmund is ordained. So, all the novels have some winter chapters.

But only *Emma* has a snowfall. In *Mansfield Park* a little snow on the ground prompts Sir Thomas to ask why Fanny does not have a fire in the East room and snow features in Aunt Norris’s account of the trouble she took to shepherd the household to Sotherton.³ Jane Austen’s letters mention snow from time to time, usually unenthusiastically: but that may be because she seems often to be in a city when it is snowing, so that by snow she must most often mean slush. But perhaps she just did not like it—the combination of impassable roads and impractical garments—think how often a moment in one of her novels turns on who has the thickest boots, or whether the ground is unsuitable for ladies’ shoes.

But as a snow-loving North American deprived of my birthright by living in Britain, where it really does not snow nearly enough, I have always treasured the snowfall in Chapter xv of *Emma*, which endangers no one’s safety, despite Mr. Woodhouse’s fears, but threatens everyone’s equanimity: at the news that snow has fallen while the party from Hartfield is having an unwonted evening out at Randalls, ‘every body […] had something to say’—most of it absurd (I xv 136).

We should not forget, though, that this tense chapter in which snow falls, threatening to overturn carriages, and keep Mr. Woodhouse from his dish of gruel and his elder daughter from her children, this chilly chapter begins and ends with the heat emanating from the amorous Mr. Elton. His overindulgence in Mr. Weston’s good wine first ‘[elevates] his spirits’ (I xv 141) so that his attentions to Emma—attentions the reader has understood, while Emma has refused to recognize them—these

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³ ‘what with frost and snow upon beds of stones, it was worse than anything you can imagine, I was quite in an agony about him [the senior coachman]. And then the poor horses too!— To see them straining away! You know how I always feel for the horses’ (II i 222).
attentions breathily, vinously increase, prompting ‘surprize’ in Mrs. Weston and offending Emma even before the announcement of snow produces a general atmosphere of alarm (I xv 135). His over-indulgence, once the carriages are in motion and he is alone with Emma, will lead Mr. Elton as the chapter moves to a climax, to seize her hand, demand her attention and then to be ‘actually making violent love to her’ (I xv 140); though her contemptuous rejection sobers him up fast, so that the last image we have of this ill-starred pair is of them sitting in the burning silence of ‘mutually deep mortification’ as the carriage inches its way toward Hartfield through the snow (I xv 143). So the snow panic, my main interest here, is bookended by segments of one of the great drunk scenes in literature—again, this is an experiment Jane Austen does not attempt again in her mature fiction. What is it about Chapter xv?

The main action is set, as is that of the preceding chapter, at Randalls, the Westons’ house, and focuses less on Mr. Elton than on the young Knightleys, on Mr. Woodhouse and his daughter—and on Mr. Knightley. John Knightley, the younger brother, the London lawyer, cool, clever, not-entirely-amiable and distinctly unsociable, is spending an evening out under duress, a constraint which affects most of the Hartfield family: Isabella, John’s sweet-natured wife, is never very willing to be separated from her children; Mr. Woodhouse prefers to have no break or variation in his routine. This party, an opportunity for the newlywed Westons to offer hospitality at Christmastime to their oldest and dearest friends, has been achieved by Mr. Weston’s sociability working alongside Emma’s gift for events management.

As the chapter opens it is getting late, and Mr. Woodhouse, whose postprandial tendency is to withdraw along with the ladies rather than to remain at table with the gentlemen, is already ‘quite ready to go home’ (I xv 134) when Mr. John Knightley floors the assembly ‘with the information of the ground being covered with snow, and of its still snowing fast, with a strong drifting wind’ (I xv 136). We have already learned that when he loses patience with his father-in-law’s anxieties, John Knightley expresses that impatience with sarcasm: ‘“I dare say we shall all be safe at Hartfield before midnight”’ (I xv 136). He ‘pursues

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4 The ‘breathy’ attentions of Mr. Eliot might recall Austen’s portrait of the ‘broad-faced, stuffy uncle Phillips, breathing port wine, who followed them into the room’ in *Pride and Prejudice* (I xvi 85).
this’, as the narrative puts it ‘rather unfeelingly’: he is not at all a heartless man, as we learn from his kindness to Jane Fairfax later in the novel, but John Knightley can be rendered almost savage by his father-in-law’s dithering—probably because he cannot help but recognize that Mr. Woodhouse’s great virtue, his gentleness, is one he himself lacks.

But the snow in *Emma* is one of those events which provides everyone present with the opportunity to act intensely in character: as John Knightley waxes ever more sardonic, and his wife more passionately and absurdly maternal—‘The horror of being blocked up at Randalls, while her children were [a half-mile away] at Hartfield was full in her imagination’—Mr. Weston becomes ever more affable and convivial, Mrs. Weston more comforting and kind, Mr. Woodhouse more anxious and nervous, and more dependent on Emma: “‘What is to be done, my dear Emma?—what is to be done?’” (I xv 137).

But it is the elder Mr. Knightley, who is like his younger brother in ‘penetration’ (I xvi 146), but unlike him in forbearance with others’ weakness, whose sterling characteristics jump to life here, as he behaves quickly and calmly—and kindly: and it is so low-key as to be almost invisible. Having ‘left the room immediately after his brother’s first report of the snow,’ while the others were fretting and fussing and worrying each other, he has walked out by himself along the Highbury Road—and, in his report back, the rumoured snow, with all its terrors, becomes the real snow, ‘nowhere above half an inch deep’ (I xv 138). He has spoken to the coachmen, which no one else has thought of doing, despite the fact that this is the single Jane Austen novel in which a coachman (James) attains something like the status of a character. And the two experienced servants have told him that there is ‘nothing to apprehend’—and, of course, where Mr. Woodhouse is concerned, apprehensiveness is all (I xv 138).

But Mr. Knightley’s quiet heroism here should not blind us to Emma’s equally strong-minded behaviour: both of them act fast, and they act fast together:

Mr Knightley and Emma settled it in a few brief sentences: thus—
‘Your father will not be easy; why do not you go?’
‘I am ready, if the others are.’
‘Shall I ring the bell?’
‘Yes, do.’

And the bell was rung, and the carriages spoken for. (I xv 138–39)
A frank, intelligent, mutually confiding, mutually reliant exchange: no ‘he said … she said’ on the author’s part, no demurring and no hesitation on the characters’—here, these two are calmly decisive amidst all the confusion; they are co-operating, they are equal. They are both forceful, and tactful—tactfulness, whatever the weather, being the single most important requirement for survival in Highbury.

Are they not made for each other? Though it will take them more than 300 pages, and well into a very hot summer, before they both know it.

Some reflections: much writing about Jane Austen emphasizes, indeed, presumes, that she rarely if ever uses literary techniques that could be described as symbolism. I think her treatment of weather contradicts this truism, and here, where the snow is at once a metaphor for the cut-off, snow-globe quality of life in Highbury, and a meteorological phenomenon with its origins in a cyclone of the North Pole as it dissipates itself across the North Atlantic to arrive as a light fall of snow in Surrey, we see the way in which, like her contemporary Wordsworth, she weaves together the realistic and the symbolic. The weather is a symbol of the enclosed and circumscribed world in which Emma has grown up, but it is also a part of the endangering real world which threatens and beckons to the inhabitants of this English village. It is like the war in Europe that has been going on for decades—it was ‘the chances of his military life’, after all, that introduced Captain Weston to Miss Churchill and produced Frank (I ii 13). Not fully understood by these inhabitants of a slowly changing rural England, or by anyone who lives through them, and rarely discussed in any depth, both ‘the weather [...] the war’ (the phrase is from ‘As the Team’s Head-Brass’ by Edward Thomas, who was writing about rural England 100 years later during another war) have deep consequences for Austen’s characters.