Persuasion, by Jane Austen

In A Nutshell

Persuasion was the last novel Jane Austen completed, and it didn't appear in print until 1818, after she had passed away. It's also shorter than most of her other novels, and some critics think that, because she wrote the novel while she was sick with the disease that would eventually kill her, she didn't expand and polish *Persuasion* as much as she would have if she had been in good health.

Because of *Persuasion*'s shorter length, it was published as a package with another novel that Austen hadn't published during her lifetime – her first completed novel, *Northanger Abbey*. Publishing the two novels together does make sense as more than a marketing gimmick (two Austen novels for the price of one!) – both are set partly in Bath, both feature bookish heroines, and both have troublesome father figures.

But there are also major differences between the two books. While *Northanger Abbey* is a lighthearted send-up of Gothic novel clichés, the term scholars most often use to describe *Persuasion* is "autumnal" – the kind of feeling you get when there's a chill in the air and dead leaves falling from the trees. *Persuasion*'s protagonist is an aristocratic woman named Anne Eliot. Anne is unmarried, having rejected her lover, a naval officer, after being persuaded by her friends and family that he was unsuitable. At 27 she's the oldest of Austen's heroines and, unlike the others, she's already had, and lost, her chance at love. Anne lives on her memories of summer, but feels that only winter lies ahead.

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Persuasion asks: are endings ever really endings? When is it worthwhile holding on to the past, and when should you let it go and move on to the next thing? And the novel asks that question on a much larger scale than just Anne's romantic prospects. In setting up a face off between those who inherited their social status (the aristocracy) and those who worked for it (naval officers), *Persuasion* examines the pros and cons of the way power is distributed in society – and how that distribution is changing. The novel is set at a historical moment when society is in major flux: the Napoleonic Wars, which had been raging for over a decade, finally seem over, and the troops are at long last coming home to make new lives for themselves as civilians. They return to a nation that glorifies their military service but is ruled by an aristocracy that doesn't always want to accept them as equals. Can the to-the-manor-born aristocrat and the self-made individual figure out how to get along? Should they even try? Is it time to turn off the life support on the old ways of living, or are there parts worth saving? Not only Anne but her whole society (and Austen's too) have to figure out answers to these questions, or at least think through them well enough to find their way through winter into spring.

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Big Picture Study Questions

1 How does the theme of persuasion develop throughout the novel? What distinguishes good uses of persuasion from bad ones? When is persuasion justified?

2 How does the novel represent the navy and naval officers? Which aspects does it portray as positive or negative, and why?

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3 Why does the action in the novel move around to so many different places? How do the rural or urban surroundings affect what 's happening with the story and characters?

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