

A. K. PITTMAN



PUDGE &  
PREJUDICE



## PRAISE FOR *PUDGE & PREJUDICE*

Written with wit and considerable insight into the highs and lows of first love, this coming-of-age twist on the Jane Austen classic had me laughing out loud, singing '80s lyrics in my head, and cheering on the brilliant, yet self-deprecating heroine. *Pudge and Prejudice* is a joy to read from beginning to end!

LORIE LANGDON, author of *Olivia Twist* and the Disney Villains series

Allison Pittman will have readers laughing (and singing) on every page of this delightfully tenderhearted novel for all ages. In *Pudge and Prejudice*, she not only offers a brilliant, modern retelling of Jane Austen's classic, she taps into the best of the human spirit through the witty yet hopeful lens of a quirky and often "unseen" teenage girl. With spot-on voicing, Pittman crafts a particularly savvy character who learns that beauty really is soul deep and that she's got something of value to offer her new town. Try not to sing along as you read this sweet story. Dare you!

JULIE CANTRELL, *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of *Perennials*

What a delight! In *Pudge and Prejudice*, Pittman appeals to the young and the young-at-heart, bringing Jane Austen's masterpiece to radiant life in a 1980s Texas high school. Packed with names and references from all Austen's novels, Jane-ites will relish this new young heroine. Pudge will steal your heart and—as she finds her Darcy—take you right back to the thrill of first love.

KATHERINE REAY, bestselling author of *Dear Mr. Knightley* and *The Printed Letter Bookshop*

Full of spunk, wit, and '80s charm, *Pudge and Prejudice* is a retelling so immersive and unique, it stands on its own, a masterpiece that would cause even Jane Austen to reach for a boom box. A. K. Pittman dazzles with her rich voice and attention to detail, making this book a brilliant addition to the YA space. Truly, I cannot wait to read what she writes next!”

CAROLINE GEORGE, author of *Dearest Josephine*

quintessence: *the most perfect example of a quality or class: EPITOME*

*Pudge and Prejudice is the quintessence of what a Jane Austen retelling should be.*

Austenites, rejoice! This is the P&P adaptation we've been waiting for. With a fresh and sparkling YA voice that is certain to draw in readers of all ages, A. K. Pittman has refashioned the most ubiquitous of all Austen characters and storylines into a setting and style so innovative and yet organic—a Texas high school in the 1980s—you can't help but wonder if this is somehow what Jane had in mind for Darcy and Elizabeth all along. Readers will wonder why there were no hair scrunchies, Swatches, and pegged jeans at the original Netherfield ball. I can't remember the last time I loved a book as much as I love this one. It's an instant classic I will return to time after time.

BETHANY TURNER, award-winning author of *The Secret Life of Sarah Hollenbeck* and *Hadley Beckett's Next Dish*

Equally funny and poignant, *Pudge and Prejudice* is a brilliant nod to a classic work while still remaining true to '80s pop culture and appealing to modern teens. The only explanation for how Pittman managed to have both my teen daughter and me laughing and identifying with Elyse is that the author is a magician. The interplay between the three sisters is spot on. The connection between Jayne and Elyse is sweet without

being syrupy, and the somewhat competitive if protective relationship between Lydia and Elyse is a picture of the best in childhood sibling rivalry. Even better, the small-town Texas setting lays out every single pop culture reference and nostalgic event of the '80s that makes me want to run for my scrunchies and Walkman. Truly every reader, young or old, will find something to love in this quick read. Well done. Well done.

JANYRE TROMP, editor, and author of *That Sinking Feeling*

*Pudge and Prejudice* is the Jane Austen adaptation we've all been waiting for! Set in the 1980s, *Pudge and Prejudice* is ripe with cultural references that will delight both young readers AND their mothers. We'll all be wishing we could bust out our Walkmans as we follow Elyse Nebbitt into the murky waters of her new Texas high school, where her beautiful older sister, Jayne, becomes the instant "It girl" and her younger sister, Lydia, makes a fool of them all. Meanwhile, Elyse finds herself both fascinated by and exasperated with Billy Fitz, the popular, brooding boy skulking around school. Laugh-out-loud funny, sweet, poignant, and timely, this book is a delightful throwback to the classic tale that we all know and love. Allison Pittman has honored Jane Austen well with this wonderful novel.

KELLI STUART, author of the award-winning novel *Like a River from Its Course* and *A Silver Willow by the Shore*

I'd never imagined Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* set in a 1980s teen world, but Pittman makes it work with expert skill that all ages will adore. Between Elyse's internal monologues, hysterical teen antics, family drama, and the references to all-things-'80s, this book will have you chuckling, cheering, and smiling as Austen's classic takes a clever turn into the world of scrunchies, high school, and first loves. Move over Bon Jovi

and Cyndi Lauper. *Pudge and Prejudice* is a delightful hit at both the funny bone and the heart.

PEPPER BASHAM, author of the Mitchell's Crossroads series and *My Heart Belongs in the Blue Ridge*

Does the world need yet another Austen adaptation? Yes. Yes it does. And the world needs this one. *Pudge and Prejudice* is a book with snort-laugh inducing turns of phrase, nostalgia for days, and all the heart you could ever want in a story. Add to that characters who feel like friends and the delightfully sincere narrative voice of Elyse Nebbitt, and the novel shines. An absolute joy!

SUSIE FINKBEINER, author of *Stories That Bind Us* and *All Manner of Things*

Nostalgic yet on trend, *Pudge and Prejudice* is equal parts smart and relatable. Allison Pittman's voice shines with wit and charm in this story that will delight mothers and daughters alike. Grab your scrunchies and your '80s tunes for this can't-miss romance!

ASHLEY CLARK, author of the Heirloom Secrets series

Humorous and heartfelt. Jane Austen would be utterly delighted in this *Pride and Prejudice* adaption by Allison Pittman!

TERI WILSON, bestselling author of *Unleashing Mr. Darcy*, now a Hallmark Channel original movie

With its relatable characters who steal your heart, nostalgic '80s references, and hilarious, soul-stirring voice, *Pudge and Prejudice* will be your favorite read of the year. If A. K. Pittman's name is on the cover, I'm reading it.

JENNY B. JONES, award-winning author of *A Katie Parker Production* and *I'll Be Yours*

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wander  
An imprint of  
Tyndale House  
Publishers





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*Pudge and Prejudice*

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Designed by Jacqueline L. Nuñez

Edited by Sarah Rubio

Published in association with William K. Jensen Literary Agency, 119 Bampton Court, Eugene, Oregon 97404.

*Pudge and Prejudice* is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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ISBN 978-1-4964-4282-6 (hc); ISBN 978-1-4964-4283-3 (sc)

Printed in the United States of America

26 25 24 23 22 21 20  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

If you're lost, you can look and you will find me  
Time after time  
If you fall, I will catch you, I'll be waiting  
Time after time

**Cyndi Lauper**

**"Time After Time," *She's So Unusual* (1983)**

I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the  
look, or the words, which laid the foundation.  
It is too long ago. I was in the middle before  
I knew that I *had* begun.

**Jane Austen**

***Pride and Prejudice* (1813)**



**candor**: *unreserved, honest, or sincere expression* :  
FORTHRIGHTNESS

*Elyse Nebbitt's candor, while refreshing, would also prove to be a most troublesome feature.*

IT IS A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED that a teenage girl in possession of a double-digit jeans size must be in want of a diet. I'm just not a part of that universe. All my life—my chunky, pudgy, soft-bellied life—I've always found something I needed more than a smaller waist. Like to read more books, to learn more words, to know the personal satisfaction of guessing the grocery total before the cashier *beeps* through all the produce. You know, things that matter.

I am the Saturn of my solar system, only instead of a body surrounded by floating chunks of ice, I have a single, soft, rippling ring. Nothing a few celery sticks wouldn't cure, according to my mother. Not all girls are *naturally* thin, Elyse, she tells me. Every day. Followed by, Boys aren't likely to take the time to search for inner beauty.

To the universe, being thin means being *right*. In my case, it would mean my mother was right, and boys were right. If I've learned nothing else in my fifteen years, it's this: I would rather stand my ground in all my wrongness than step one foot into

someone else's idea of right, even if it means I'm sometimes left standing alone.

Then September of my Sophomore year, 1984, my entire universe changed.

My father ripped our family up from our mediocre life in Phoenix to pursue an equally mediocre job in Texas. Northenfield, Texas, to be exact, where he would spend his days doing something called Property Management. Actually, his company had given him three choices: Someplace, Ohio; Somewhere, California; and here. But Ohio was too cold for my mother's taste and California too expensive for my father's salary.

And so, Northenfield, Texas.

Texas.

It's not like I was expecting cowboy hats and gunfights. I watch *Dallas*. So I knew it had cities and towns, just like we drove through on our way here. I knew it couldn't be much different from what we were used to in Arizona, but the view from behind the U-Haul wasn't exactly promising. When we finally came into what would be our "town," I counted one string of fast-food restaurants and two scrawny strip malls. There was, however, no lack of churches. One after another lined the streets. Methodist, Baptist, First Baptist, Southern Baptist, Lutheran, Sanctification Baptist—each differentiated only by the name and the quippy message on the sign out front.

BIBLE CLIFF'S NOTES: SIN, BAD. JESUS, GOOD.

DID YOU "FALL" INTO SIN? TIME FOR

BACK-TO-SUNDAY SCHOOL!

GOD BLESS THE BADGERS

This last one I wouldn't understand until we drove past Northenfield's one enormous High School: HOME OF THE BADGERS. So at least I could rest easy knowing my

future classmates and I were blessed by the congregation of Sanctification Baptist Church. When I had a chance, I'd suggest we visit there first, just to keep all of our interests under one roof.

Our street was in a perfectly average neighborhood, if on the downside of shabby. Older houses—all of them with porches and swings. Rough green yards, huge trees. Like everybody on the street had agreed that they would tidy up later.

“It looks so *normal*,” I said to my older sister, Jayne. She and I were in the second seat of the Station Wagon—Mom driving, following Dad, who was solo in the U-Haul. Somehow, after six hours in the car, Jayne managed to look beautiful, her blonde hair in symmetrical, fluffy feathers, her skin miraculously sweat free, her clothes unrumpled to catalog perfection. Some would think this would conjure up some sort of jealous spark in me, but it's really more of a sense of wonder. Being jealous of Jayne would be like being jealous of a butterfly, who has no more control over its beauty than Jayne does. Everything about Jayne is *effortless*. Not just her beauty, but her kindness, her goodness. In a way, we are everything each other is not, so we stick together in our weak spots. And that's important, because in this family, you need a hand to hold in our spinning vortex of chaos.

The moment the big truck turned onto what Mom called “our” street, Jayne and I each rolled down our windows, trying to guess which would be “our” house. There was no sign out front, and since it was the middle of the day, plenty of driveways were empty. But then, the huge truck with all of our worldly possessions drifted to a stop, and Dad hopped out with all the fanfare a middle-aged man could muster. Mom pulled precariously into the narrow drive, and we were home.

The house.

Our place in Phoenix looked like every other house in Phoenix. Small, square, tan. A front yard full of rocks. Little

rocks, big rocks. But this—it looked like something out of one of Mom’s movies-of-the-week, where the story is about some young woman inheriting an old house, then there’s a montage of painting and hammering with some hunky carpenter before—*voilà!*—the essence of quaint Victorian architecture is restored. But we had a dad who, as far as I knew, didn’t own a tool belt, and a mom whose housework didn’t extend beyond doling out chores to me and my sisters. So, really, I didn’t know if the house was sadder to see *us* than we were to see the house. While I knew it was nothing more than two stories of brick and wood and windows, I swear I saw it take a deep breath and sigh as we piled out onto its lawn. Never before had I felt compelled to apologize to a domicile. But for the time being we belonged to each other.

We are what has been called a “sprawling” family. Mom and Dad, Jayne and me, and three other sisters besides. Yes, five of us. Five Nebbitt Girls. Jayne, as I have mentioned, is beautiful, but that’s not nearly an accurate-enough descriptor. She is sixteen, a Junior, and looks pretty much like she should be in the pages of *Mademoiselle* magazine. “Five Quick Fixes to Take You from Tolerable to Tantalizing!” Our younger sister Lydia is thirteen and also pretty, but in a much more cautionary way. And by “cautionary,” I mean—lock up your little brothers. Between her long, spiraled hair, her short shorts, eye makeup, lip gloss, and—um—figure, she could pass for at least seventeen. But the only thing “seven” about her is her grade. As in, *seventh*. But only because she had to repeat kindergarten. I know for a fact Mom finagled the rules to enroll her in eighth here in Northenfield.

There are two others, too. Mary and Kitty. The Littles. One is six and one is eight; one likes to read and the other likes ponies. I don’t know much beyond that. They’re always just kind of *there*, you know? Filling chairs at dinnertime, using

the last of the toothpaste, hogging the TV. Jayne and I love them, of course. The way you love a pet—not like a puppy or anything, but more like a couple of hamsters that can capture your fancy for an entire afternoon before becoming nothing but rustling, squeaking noise you have to remember to feed.

My parents lump us into two groups: the big girls and the little girls. I am, of course, one of the big girls. Two years older than Lydia, one year younger than Jayne, who also happens to be my best friend.

The Littles, even though they'd been relegated to the backward-facing third seat of the Station Wagon, managed to be the first ones out of the car, climbing over Jayne and me, squealing with delight at the yard and the trees. Perfect for a Swing! Or a Tree House! Or a Fort! In the backyard, if there was a backyard. They ran in circles, tumbling over each other, getting leaves and grass in their hair, and laughing because they had to Pee!

I swear the house looked at me for help.

Jayne and I unfolded ourselves out of the car. For me, it was a slow, sweaty process, pulling my T-shirt away from my back and waving it to make a breeze. No one would ever believe we'd come from a shared experience. She wore a pair of pink jogging shorts and a tank top and looked like she could have been a model for an ad for the Diet Pepsi she was drinking.

“So this is it,” she said, offering me a sip.

I took a swig. Normally, I hate the taste of diet anything, but I felt a need to build up courage. Apparently Mom did, too, because her hands were still gripping the wheel.

“Is she ever going to get out of the car?”

Jayne took the can of soda back. “I think she’s as freaked out as the rest of us.”

Dad jangled a set of keys above his head and was all, “Hey girls! Let’s check out the new digs!”—like any of us ever talk like

that. But it was sweet how he included Mom in his *girls*, because that seemed to do the trick to get her out of the car.

“C’mon,” I said to Jayne. “I want to see the charm on the inside.”

We followed Dad up the stairs while Mom rounded up the Littles. The only Nebbitt not on the front lawn was Lydia, who remained in the front seat of the car. Arms folded. Face pouting.

“I am, like, not getting out of the car? Okay?” She had perfected the vernacular of the Valley Girl, even though we’d never spent more than a week in California.

Dad shouted something to her about not being able to have her choice of room because the sluggard shall not inherit the desirings of her heart—but no proverb would ever get Lydia to do anything she didn’t want to do.

The house had a big porch that went all the way from one end to the other, with five shallow steps leading up to it. The wood felt soft and worn, and my first step felt like the latest of a thousand. My mind went to every classic old movie I’d ever seen—all the porch swings and suitors and moonlit nights. But there was no porch swing here. Instead, there was this long wooden board with little rocker-like things under the four legs. The minute Mom saw it, she did this annoying little hand-clappy laugh and squealed something about *never having seen one in real life and here on our very porch . . .*

Dad had no idea what the thing was, and neither did I. Mom’s been known to get just as excited over a really good dish of pudding, so I was ready to ignore this, too. But Mom wouldn’t take another step before educating all of us on the joys of the Juggling Board.

Most people, see, are allowed to have nice, normal furniture on their front porch. A bench. The aforementioned swing. Maybe a little table for lemonade. Not the Nebbitts. We inherited this thing. It’s huge—like, ten feet long. And the deal

is—according to Mom’s rambling explanation—a girl sits on one end, a boy on the other. Then, somehow, you rock—or, *juggle*—the board, and the motion scooches you both to the center, where I guess you share a kiss? I don’t know. It’s something Mom learned about on PBS. And, legend has it, nobody with a Juggling Board on their porch will ever have an unwed daughter in the house.

The whole time Mom was telling me this, I was watching Lydia get out of the Station Wagon. She was wearing a pair of white satin shorts that barely cleared the top of her thighs and a Dr Pepper T-shirt that, besides being cut in half, was at least two sizes too small. It’s not what she was wearing when we left the Shady 8 motel that morning—Dad would never have given his blessing—so she must have changed in the car. Mom thinks she is adorable. I think that if anybody looks like they belong on a Juggling Board, it’s my sister Lydia.

Right then, though, Dad was too excited about the new house to give much thought to his daughter’s indecency. He took a deep breath, uttered one of his trademark Nebbitt family prayers—part Scripture, part sitcom, and part phrases he remembered from his quote-of-the-day calendar—and swung open the screen door, declaring a little WD-40 would work that squeak right out.

Now, I don’t know if it’s technically possible to fall in love with a house. But given my prospects for romance, it’s a much safer bet than a boyfriend, and whatever faded paint and broken screens might have been visible on the outside, the inside was pure charm. Worn down, overstuffed, dust-in-the-daylight enchantment.

Dad gave the instruction to take off and explore, which Jayne and I did while Mom got the Littles to the bathroom. We ran upstairs first, instinctively knowing it would be our domain, and found four rooms attached by crooked hallways,

with shadowy alcoves where a girl could disappear if she wanted to. Jayne and I claimed our bedroom, reserving the rights of the eldest to choose the one with a sixteen-paned dormer window that looked right out onto the front yard. No closet to speak of, but two four-poster beds, a big armoire, and a chest with ten drawers. I mean, we had a U-Haul full of furniture and stuff, but this place was semifurnished throughout, like a bonus.

Back downstairs, however, Mom wasn't nearly as pleased. She has this way of sniffing and talking out of the side of her mouth, and she was wandering from corner to corner performing this exact ritual, saying there'd be mice, for sure, and what a bear it would be to heat and cool, and since we were only babysitting this place on the whim of the owner—well, who knew when we would be thrown out onto the streets?

But then, Mom can complain about anything. The world is full of delights she can ruin with a single, shrill word.

Meanwhile, Jayne and I flew up and down the stairs, bringing our bags in from the Station Wagon, and even crawling around in the U-Haul for the few boxes we had clearly labeled. Lydia, banished to the small, slope-roofed room, was lying flat on her back on the floor, declaring she wouldn't lift a finger to seal her own fate.

I was mid-trek with a box when Mom hollered from the car that she was taking the Littles with her to the grocery store to get a few supplies and dropping Dad off at the office where he had a blah-blah meeting with some-whozit-body about setting up a new whatever, so Jayne and I would be in charge of helping the movers.

Movers? In what way was I even remotely qualified to supervise a bunch of movers?

Dad said to relax, it was just a few boys from the High School who needed to get community service hours.

“Like, *criminals*?” I asked.

Before he could answer, Lydia came tearing out of the front door, propelled by the powerful promise of Boys. Movers, criminals. Whatever.

As if for the first time, Dad noticed her outfit and declared she would do best to help Mom at the grocery store.

Knowing the cavalry was on its way, Jayne and I sat on opposite ends of the Juggling Board—careful not to joggle—and enjoyed a refreshing beverage rescued from the watery ice in the family travel cooler. The slightly crisp breeze of late September made the front porch more comfortable than the stuffy inside of the house, and it gave us a chance to survey the neighborhood, not that there was much to see.

“I don’t even want to think about school.” I took a handful of soggy-ish, trip-worn Cheez-Its and juggled the box down to Jayne.

“Oh, c’mon, Pudge,” she said, using the nickname I’d worn since I was a toddler and made myself sick after eating half a pan of Christmas fudge. (When Jayne asked me why my tummy hurt, I famously said, “I ated too much *pudge!*” Adorable, right?) It was our secret, this name. Only Jayne was allowed to call me that, and from her sweet lips, it never sounded like an insult. Or felt like one. “You’ll make friends. People love you.”

“No, people love *you*. I get the residual affection.”

“You’re silly. But, if you really want something to worry about, get this. While you were asleep, Mom let it slip on the drive that the school isn’t a regular High School. It’s a Junior High and High School combined. Not, like, in the same building? But right next door.”

She bit a tiny cheese cracker in half and chewed while the meaning sank in.

“So,” I said, the horror slowly dawning, “Lydia . . .”

“Same campus. Same clubs. Same everything. Maybe Mom could homeschool us with the little girls?”

“Yeah, because that wasn’t a complete waste. We’re lucky we can read.”

“You can do more than read. School won’t be any problem for you, brilliant one. I’m the one with terrible grades.”

“You’re exaggerating. They aren’t *terrible*. And even if they were, nobody would care because you’re so beautiful and charming.”

“You don’t get scholarships for being charming.”

“Well, you don’t get boyfriends for being smart.”

“Then I guess we’re doomed to a long life with Mom and Dad. We’ll have to put all of our hope in Lydia.”

I raised my can of Orange Crush in salute to the idea, then took a long, tepid sip. Might as well enjoy, since Mom’s grocery run wouldn’t include any sodas or snacks. These were special occasion road-trip food. Soon it would be back to canned vegetables, tuna casseroles, and bun-less burgers—Mom’s ideas of healthy family cooking. When the little girls whined for a cookie, she’d tell them such things weren’t a part of Elyse’s diet. Ah, yes. Elyse’s diet. A constant refrain and reminder of every extra pound. None of them were ever *my* diets. I would never willingly subject myself to weeks’ worth of cabbage and grapefruit. During the month or so before moving here, I’d lived on nothing but rice cakes, carrots, and Pepsi Light, listening to Mom go on and on about how wonderful it would be for me to start at a new school with a whole new figure. I guess neither of us factored in my old school’s cafeteria cheeseburgers and chips.

Jayne and I stayed quiet. Moments like this were such a rare occasion in our household, I think we were both ready to soak in the peace. Then, from out of nowhere, a sound I never expected to hear in Northenfield, Texas. The rumbling car motor, yes, that was common enough, but singing out over it was the sound of an electric guitar. As it came closer, I realized it wasn’t just any guitar, but Neal Schon’s. As in, Journey, and

we were hearing the unmistakable guitar solo of “Don’t Stop Believin’.” In only a matter of seconds, we could put the music together with a car—Camaro, late seventies model, midnight blue. Sweeter than sweet. And, shock of all shocks, it came to a screeching, rumbling, rocking stop right behind our U-Haul.

There are those moments when you get the opportunity to stop and have a short talk with yourself and say, “*Hey, self! Remember this. Make a note. Get rid of the brain space you’re using to remember your lines from the fourth grade play and make room.*”

This was one of those moments.

The music played on to the end of the song, then disappeared when the engine cut. The doors opened, and two boys got out. One looked like sunshine—blond, curly-all-over hair, tall, thin, green IZOD shirt with the collar popped. The boy with him, everything opposite. Dark, straight hair, parted in the middle and feathered to the sides. Jeans, Ramones T-shirt, Converse high tops.

Jayne and I set our soda cans on the Juggling Board and stood up, because it was pretty obvious they were headed to the front porch. The dark one hung back a little, but Preppy Boy took one look at my sister and smiled like a kid who’d found a Transformer under the Christmas tree. A new boyfriend for Jayne? Well, that would be a matter of time, as in 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . .