In 2005, Nina Bawden published a series of letters to her dead husband, Austen Kark, who was killed in the Potters Bar train crash. The letters explain the legal wrangles that followed the inquest into the accident and chronicle her attempts to cope with her anger and grief. The title of the work, Dear Austen, suggests that he is its only possible reader, as well as the only (impossible) recipient of her epistles – ‘I wish you could answer this’, ends the third letter. Yet the publishers, Virago, must have realized that the title also suggested a wider audience. So synonymous is Austen with Jane Austen that it was difficult to tell, encountering the book on the shelf in Waterstone’s, whether it was under B for Bawden or A for Austen. Some unconscious urge on the part of the bookseller or the browser would like to make it something other than it is, to transform it into another kind of posthumous correspondence.

These mistaken urges are uncomfortable in Bawden’s case, but understandable. In 1984, Fay Weldon’s Letters to Alice placed Austen’s work at the centre of a humanistic republic of reading and writing. Framed as a series of letters to Weldon’s niece who is (reluctantly) reading Pride and Prejudice (1813) for her school exams, the book excavates the Austen legacy as an epistolary encounter. More specifically, it invokes Austen’s letters to her niece Anna Austen, later Lefroy; Weldon’s Alice, like Austen’s Anna, is attempting to write a novel. We catch fleeting glimpses of this work in progress throughout their correspondence. Yet while Weldon’s chosen form suggests a reverence for the letter, ‘Aunt Fay’ is careful to demarcate it from other written communication:

And do remember, a letter counts as non-fiction. Careful, Alice. Use what I say as a sack of rather dusty brown rice, from which you will take cupfuls, at intervals, and concoct delicious and nourishing
dishes. [...] What I say, remember, is not the dish itself, merely a rather lulling ingredient, to be used at your discretion.²

The ‘care’ that she suggests Alice take hints at a peculiar anxiety about the relationships between the letter, the novel and what we might inherit from them. Her analogy of brown rice also sets up a particular model of influence and inheritance: her epistolary text must be taken in ‘cupfuls’; it is only a part of the literary process. The statement seems pertinent to Austen’s letters, too; their nugatory insights are ‘lulling ingredients’ rather than ‘the dish itself’. Why, then, might the twentieth century be so intent on writing back to her? Lacan has called letters a ‘blank cheque’,³ oscillating dangerously between writer and recipient; the letter, I will argue, allows twentieth-century women writers to explore the Austen legacy not only as a spectre to be welcomed or repealed, but as a space for reflexive and often intimate meditations on inheritance, audience and influence.

Recent Austen critics, reading her apparently trifling letters back through the novels, have chronicled a writer increasingly anxious about the self-exposure implicit in personal epistles. First Impressions becomes Pride and Prejudice (1813); the letters remain pivotal, but exceptional. For the writer of Sanditon, letters are primarily pieces of advertising rather than personal missives. Drawing on the final volume of Mansfield Park (1814), Mary Favret has noted how the letter is ‘overloaded and over-read’ in Austen’s plots, and that letters often signal ‘rupture and distance, rather than rapprochement’.⁴ The moment that Lady Susan shifts from the epistolary to the narrative is decisive; Austen’s subsequent writings resituate the letter as an object-co-opted by other readers for nefarious purposes. The movement against sensibility in the early 1800s repositions the letter as a public document, concerned with the external world rather than personal expression. It falls into the wrong hands; it is read by communities rather than individuals. It is a striking coincidence that Robert Chapman’s edition of the letters is published in 1932, two years into the decade of public faces and private places. The 1930s were uniquely placed to reassess Austen’s correspondence, and W.H. Auden’s Letter to Lord Byron (1936) famously flirts with Austen as the most appropriate addressee for his poetic ‘letter’, only to reject her as unlikely to ‘respond’ to him:

There is one other author in my pack:
For some time I debated which to write to.
Which would least likely send my letter back?