Book review

Jane Austen
by Carol Shields

Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 2001

Reviewed by Pamela Nutt

This is one of a series of biographies whose subjects range from St Augustine to Andy Warhol, from Mozart to Marlon Brando. This volume on the life of Jane Austen is written by Carol Shields, a novelist shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1993 and winner of the Pulitzer Prize.

As biographies go, this one is a slim volume (154 pages.) The advantage of this is that it can be read at a very few sittings, or at a single sitting on a self-indulgent day. The expected disadvantage (that it will skim over material dealt with more fully and satisfactorily in a range of recent biographies of Austen) is not the dominant impression gained in reading Shields’ account of Austen and her work. This is largely because this work is very consciously the reflections of one writer on the life and work of another. Shields’ response is shaped by the fact that she is one of ‘those who interest themselves in the creative art’. She feels the anger Austen directs to the publisher Crosby and Co as they neglected to publish Susan/Northanger Abbey. It is an ‘outrage (which) can be understood by any contemporary writer who has been treated in a disrespectful way by a publisher’.

Shields also feels particularly Austen’s writing ‘behind a wall of isolation’ at Steventon and at Chawton. Writers, she believes ‘are hugely dependent on the shared experiences of other writers’ and that, although Austen had ‘sympathetic readers’, she lacked the ‘shared presence…friendships and correspondence’ that Shields herself values.

The years spent in Bath and the ‘abrupt cessation of her novels’ during this period is also understood by Shields from the writer’s perspective. Citing Virginia Woolf, Shields reminds us that a writer does not need stimulation, but rather its opposite, regularity – ‘the same books around her, the same walls…self-ordered patterns of time, her own desk, and day after profitable day in order to do her best work’. None of these qualities characterised Austen’s life in Bath. The ‘delicate balance between solitude and interaction’ was disrupted.

That Austen achieved what she did – alone – is central to Shield’s admiration of her. Indeed, Shields presents a picture of Austen which often emphasises her loneliness in the family as well. She makes much of Jane Austen’s coolness at times to her mother, to her brother James, and even towards Cassandra at one period of her life. Aspects of the novels’ heroines reflect, for Shields, aspects of their creator’s own capacities, but it is Anne Elliot who ‘combines Austen’s sense of loss and loneliness, her regrets, her intelligence and, in the end, her unwillingness to lead a disappointed life’.

This is not to say that Shields’ portrait is predominantly sad or gloomy. It certainly isn’t. The excitement of being in print and the impetus and confidence that this gave to Austen’s work are once again viewed through the eyes of a fellow-writer.

So, the emphasis in this book is on the act of writing – its models, processes, frustrations and joys. The details of Austen’s life are familiar, and Shields acknowledges a very respectable list of sources, most of which will be familiar to Austen devotees. Aspects such as Mrs Austen’s arrangements for her young children, Jane Austen’s schooling, family details, Tom Lefroy, the move to Bath, a chronology of the novels, Harris Bigg-Wither, life at Chawton and Austen’s final illness are dealt with more fully, and at times more accurately, in many other places.

Even in this abbreviated form, however, they are connected well by the biographer to the development of the writer and her work. The point of literary biography, Shields believes, ‘is to throw light on a
writer's works, rather than (to comb) the works to recreate the author'. There is, unfortunately, some
evidence that Shields did not 'comb the works' carefully enough. Something is lost when Shields 
refers to 'Mr Knightley (providing Emma) with lists of improving books he hopes she will read'. It is 
much more fun to picture, as Austen did, Emma's making and disregarding these lists herself.

At times I have to admit to being frustrated by longer biographies of Austen, not because of their 
deficiencies, but because finding the time to give adequate attention to them is not always an easy 
matter. Shields' approach to her subject has the advantage not only of introducing readers unfamiliar 
with this material to some details of Austen's life but also of creating succinctly, strongly and 
memorably an impression of Austen and her work. 

It is also a relief to find that a contemporary novelist is more concerned with writing about Jane Austen 
than with writing in the style of Jane Austen. 

- Pamela Nutt
Jane Austen was also a master at this and is a particular skill several contemporary Regency and Victorian Romance authors fail to achieve. #29: The Tenant of Wildfell Hall By Anne Brontë. Goodreads Summary: "Gilbert Markham is deeply intrigued by Helen Graham, a beautiful and secretive young widow who has moved into nearby Wildfell Hall with her young son. So, fellow Jane Austen fans, what books will you be reading? Any suggestions of your own? Sound off below!" Top Photo: From Austenland Book Cover. Are you a romance fan? Follow the silver petticoat review: Our romance-themed entertainment site is on a mission to help you find the best period dramas, romance movies, TV shows, and books. "Jane Austen. Why should you be reading it? It could be difficult for some to understand why a novel about some girls whose first aspiration in life is to get married is still so well-known nowadays, and some may even consider it a retrograde reading. The world has changed and we all know that, but I do not think it will ever change so much to make Miss Austen work obsolete. When I read this book for the first time I was nearly eleven, but reading it again as an adult I started wondering how it was possible for a woman of the nineteenth century to have written such a book. She does not only seem to criticize in some way the social rules but also to make fun of them. I can tell: That woman not only had advanced ideas for her time, she also had a very ironic sense of humor! Jane Austen's most "unlikable" protagonist, a matchmaking busybody, makes this book more likable and funny than any modern romcom. Published in 1815, approximately 160,000 words. Available for free on Project Gutenberg. I became a Jane Austen fan after reading Pride and Prejudice. However, while I enjoyed my next two Austens (Northanger Abbey and Mansfield Park), neither appealed to me as much as P&P. Having finally gotten around to Emma, I deem it a better book than P&P, with a more complicated, slightly less fantastical-wish fulfillment plot, and more believable and complex characters. That said, P&P still has the edge on Emma in its light-hearted charm. You can't go wrong with Austen, a much misunderstood and underrated author in the 21st century. A memoir of how Jane Austen's novels transformed one reader's life, and a study of why we still read the Lady novelist. Describing that time in the opening pages of his sharp, endearingly self-effacing new book, "A Jane Austen Education," Deresiewicz explains that he faced one crucial obstacle. He loathed not just Jane Austen but the entire gang of 19th-century British novelists: Hardy, Dickens, Eliot... the lot. At 26, Deresiewicz wasn't experiencing the hatred born of surfeit that Mark Twain described when he told a friend, "Every time I read Pride and Prejudice I want to dig her up and hit her over the skull with her own shinbone." This is the second Jane Austen book I have read, the first being Pride and Prejudice, but I enjoyed this one much more! Emma was quite a different experience because I had no prior knowledge of the plot, and I think this led to a much more rewarding read. Emma Woodhouse, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition thinks a little too highly of herself, and entertains herself by meddling in the affairs of others.