

Portraits of a Lady

Three books about Jane Austen explore her fans, her cultural influence and what she learned from theater.

By JANE SMILEY

EVERY FEW YEARS, I reread a Jane Austen novel, and I'm not alone, according to "Among the Janeites," Deborah Yaffe's playful exploration of Austen obsession. In fact, if I were a true Janeite, I'd be hand-stitching my empire-waisted gown and perfecting my country dancing, and I'd enjoy it, as Yaffe does when she decides to go all out for a Jane Austen Society of North America (Jasna) convention. What I might not enjoy are the members' competing

AMONG THE JANEITES

A Journey Through the World of Jane Austen Fandom

By Deborah Yaffe

245 pp. Mariner/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Paper, \$15.95.

THE MAKING OF JANE AUSTEN

By Devoney Looser

Illustrated. 291 pp. Johns Hopkins University Press. \$29.95.

THE GENIUS OF JANE AUSTEN

Her Love of Theatre and Why She Works in Hollywood

By Paula Byrne

Illustrated. 334 pp. Harper Perennial. Paper, \$16.99.

opinions about who Jane was and what she would be thinking about every little issue, personal and political. And the Janeites are not all women: Yaffe interviews quite a few men. Perhaps the most peculiar is Arnie Perlestein, a conspiracy theorist convinced that Austen buried in her apparently conventional novels a "radical critique of 19th-century patriarchy" that he has "spent more than 15,000 completely uncompensated hours devising." Other Janeites don't need compensation. Among the most fascinating is Sandy Lerner, one of the founders of Cisco Systems who, along with her boyfriend-then-husband-now-ex-husband, gave you the router that allows you to sit up in bed and read this review on your computer screen. After Lerner sold her stake in Cisco, she bought and refurbished Chawton House, where Jane's brother Edward Austen Knight lived, and where (in the nearby village of Chawton) Jane herself spent the last eight years of her life. Lerner then installed a large library of women's literature written between 1600 and 1830 in Chawton House and opened it for study by students and scholars.

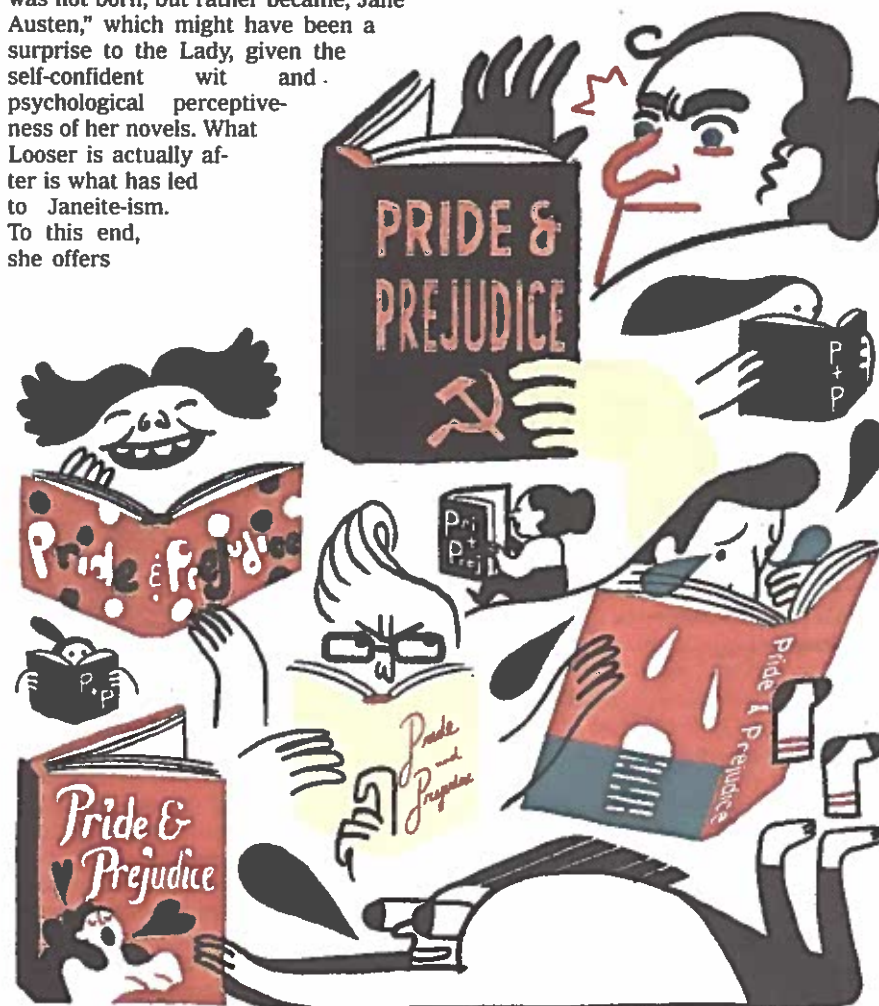
Yaffe's tone is light but precise. Her "journey through the world of Jane Austen fandom" is amusing and sometimes mind-boggling. Every avid devotee has her or his very own Jane, whether secretly

JANE SMILEY'S most recent book is "Golden Age," the third volume of the *Last Hundred Years* trilogy.

abused or coolly observant or a revolutionary in disguise. One fan Yaffe meets is the scholar Devoney Looser, author of "The Making of Jane Austen." Looser goes to Jasna conferences and participates in Janeite projects, but what she's really interested in is how the Jane Austen whose books were first published simply as "by a Lady" became the ubiquitous cultural presence she is today.

Looser begins by asserting that "she was not born, but rather became, Jane Austen," which might have been a surprise to the Lady, given the self-confident wit and psychological perceptiveness of her novels. What Looser is actually after is what has led to Janeite-ism. To this end, she offers

pecially at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, is energetic and revealing. On the one hand, the members of traditional London men's clubs adored Austen because they felt that they alone had the discernment to appreciate her (conservative) politics and literary nuance. On the other, suffragists, both overt and covert, claimed her as their own. Looser writes particularly vividly of a huge demonstration on a hot and windy



ELEANOR DAVIS

a good survey of the landscape of books in the 19th century: how they were presented to buyers and readers, how they were illustrated, which authors were popular and why. If the chapters on illustrators suffer, it's only because Looser gives us too few examples to view. (She does point out that for much of the 19th century Austen's characters were portrayed by illustrators as contemporaries of their readers; it wasn't until roughly 70 years after Austen's death that the characters depicted in the novels began wearing Regency gowns.)

The first few chapters of "The Making of Jane Austen" plod forward in their perhaps necessary way, but the second half, where Looser discusses the various groups that attached themselves to Austen's works and saw themselves in Austen's works, es-

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day in June 1908 when 1,000 marchers, part of a crowd of 10,000, carried heavy silk banners bearing the names of important women (among the authors were not only Jane Austen but Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Barrett Browning) on their way to the Royal Albert Hall. Looser also discusses how academia has treated Austen and how her novels have been taught in schools, partly by means of textbooks that have excerpted, cut and manipulated her work. One of Looser's most amusing illustrations is from the October 1971 issue of *National*

Lampoon ("Jane Austen. Isn't that the kind of cupcake they used to sell at the A.&P.?"), which makes fun of those who have avoided English literature courses.

But it's Paula Byrne's "The Genius of Jane Austen" that gives us the most insightful analysis of the making of the Austen legacy. Byrne's investigation into Austen's enjoyment of plays during a period when theater was both popular and lucrative and when playwrights and actors were questioning and mocking social norms (especially those dictating male/female relationships) gives us real insight into how Austen learned to focus her material, make it amusing and give it critical punch. Byrne's knowledge of Austen's life and letters, of her family connections (her older brother Henry's "unflagging interest in the theater" gave her many opportunities to go to plays because he lived in London), allows Byrne to portray an engaged and active literary artist, looking for ways to shape her material, carefully choosing her settings and subjects. At the same time, Byrne demonstrates her own ample knowledge of the history of the English theater. The illustrations she has included are colorful and instructive — I especially like the etching of Robert Elliston, Austen's favorite comic actor, who doesn't look anything like Colin Firth.

Byrne's most important point is that Austen had her own theory of human behavior, that she understood that in early-19th-century England social classes were carefully defined but also shifting, both in London and in the countryside. Thus an intelligent Austen character would understand that in order to negotiate the boundaries and still attain true connection, not to mention respectability and moral worth, he (or especially she) would have to do some role playing, keep some secrets, watch what others were doing. Attending plays influenced Austen's work, but also her ideas about life itself. She exploited the capacity of the novel as a form to show her characters from inside and out, a skill, perhaps the skill, that gives her such consistent and wide appeal.

The Austen novel I chose this year was "Emma." Thanks to Paula Byrne, I now readily see that the amusement Austen is giving me (and herself) in the rambling, self-serving monologues of Mrs. Elton, the deceptive interactions of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, and the playful upending of class-based snobbery in Emma herself was inspired by plays Austen knew well and techniques she saw on the stage. Austen was in her late 30s when she was writing "Emma," her fourth published novel, about the same age as Alice Munro when she was pulling together the stories in "Lives of Girls and Women," or Virginia Woolf when she was composing "Jacob's Room." Janeite that I am, I can only wish Austen had lived long enough to write 12 more works of fiction, like Munro, or at least six more, like Woolf. □