Austen’s Adventures in American Popular Fiction, 1996-2006

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“EACH OF US HAS A PRIVATE AUSTEN,” Karen Joy Fowler writes at the beginning of her novel The Jane Austen Book Club (2004). Our “private Austen,” according to Fowler, is our personal sense of Jane Austen as both woman and writer—an interpretation that necessarily reflects our sense of ourselves. For Fowler’s character Sylvia, for whom family is paramount, Austen “was a daughter, a sister, an aunt. Sylvia’s Austen wrote her books in a busy sitting room, read them aloud to her family, yet remained an acute and nonpartisan observer of people. Sylvia’s Austen could love and be loved, but it didn’t cloud her vision, blunt her judgment” (2). In contrast, Sylvia’s daughter Allegra conceives of an Austen who “wrote about the impact of financial need on the intimate lives of women” and whose books belong “in the horror section” (4). The overall impression created by this varied set of “Austens” is of a figure whose writing, and to a lesser extent whose life, lends itself to distinct and ever-changing interpretations.¹

After this opening passage, what Fowler’s characters find most rewarding to discuss—and what, thanks to her creativity, their own histories reflect and refract—is Austen’s novels, not their own perceptions of her as a woman.² In contrast, it is “Jane Austen the woman” (to borrow the title of George Holbert Tucker’s 1994 biography), not Austen the writer, who chiefly preoccupied Fowler’s fellow authors of American popular fiction in the years between the watershed BBC adaptation of Pride and Prejudice in 1995 and Austen’s first biopic appearance in the 2007 feature film Becoming Jane.³ “Jane Austen” stars as both detective and narrator in Stephanie Barron’s decade-long series of mystery novels, which began with Jane and the Unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor (1996) and has reached Jane and the Barque of Frailty (2006).⁴ In Amanda Elyot’s novel By a Lady: Being the Adventures of an Enlightened American in Jane Austen’s England (2006), “Jane Austen” befriends the heroine, a twenty-first-century New York actress who has time-traveled to Bath. Finally, Sally Smith O’Rourke’s The Man Who Loved Jane Austen (2006) shows “Jane Austen” engaging in a passionate romance with a twenty-first-century man, again made possible by time travel (his, not hers).⁵

As imaginative explorations of Austen’s personality and life experience, the fictions of Barron, Elyot, and O’Rourke arguably share more with biographies of Austen than with other forms of adaptation and appropriation of her writings, such as sequels, film versions, and advice guides. While such adaptations all play with Austen’s ideas, voice, and reputation—as, indeed, does Fowler in The Jane Austen Book Club—they do not seek to reveal Austen herself, as either woman or author.⁶ “That impulse to know the author’s innermost secrets”—as John Wiltshire asserts, “the keynote of all lives of Jane Austen” (15)—is the keynote also of these fictional recreations of her. Wiltshire contends further that Austen biographers are engaged in “a form of imaginative identification” with their subject, the representation of which is “involved as much with a figure of myth or collective fantasy as with a series of historical occurrences” (17, 14). “Imaginative identification” certainly drives both the creation and the consumption of these fictional versions of Jane Austen, which gratify contemporary audiences’ desire to see her loved and appreciated.

The fantasy Austens invented by Barron, Elyot, and O’Rourke are of scholarly interest as indications of how nonacademic readers and writers conceived of Austen—or what they projected onto her image—in the first decade of her great popularity in our era.⁷ These imagined versions of Austen contribute as well to a long tradition of myth-making about, and identification with, this canonical author. Jane Austen myths, as scholars have shown, have been and continue to be fueled by the comparative paucity of biographical information and extant personal writings as well as by the
few, and much-derided, authentic visual images of her.  Crucial to Jane Austen myths from the very beginning has been the issue of her spinsterhood: originally over-emphasized by her protective family members in the course of their promotion of a “dear Aunt Jane,” Austen’s single status has more recently invited speculation as to the progress and termination of known (or hypothesized) romances, most notably with Tom Lefroy.  Other key elements in the Austen myth that have shifted considerably over time, and that are invoked by these popular authors, are the supposed uneventfulness of her life and the limited range of her art, long equated to her famous remark about “the little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory” (16-17 December 1816).

Such myth-making about Jane Austen results, as it does for Shakespeare, from the enduring enthusiasm of a wide range of readers for her writings. As Claudia Johnson has shown, this wide appeal has long existed in tension with efforts to establish and defend Austen’s canonical status.  Indeed, the popular novels of Barron, Elyot, and O’Rourke—questions of literary merit aside—can be seen as participating in a project not so dissimilar from Austen’s own. As Barbara Benedict claims, Austen did not aim her own fiction exclusively at a highbrow literary audience. Instead, Benedict declares, “her intertextuality suggests that she conceived of her novels in the context of current fiction, as a part of popular literature, and designed her novels to reach the audiences who were reading contemporary novels” (64). The popular fictions of Barron, Elyot, and O’Rourke are intertextual both in the obvious sense that they invoke Austen’s writings and also in the sense in which Benedict employs that term: that is, making use of a broad variety of genres, in this case mystery, Harlequin (or Mills and Boon) romance, chick lit, erotica, fantasy, and science fiction. Not surprisingly, these genres are often in uneasy balance with each other.

While these three authors’ project of reimagining Austen allies them with biographers, in another sense they are deeply indebted to the broader collection of recent popular works that invoke Austen and her writings. The screen adaptations in particular have created a mass market for Austen-related material, consumers to whom publishers appeal by issuing economically priced “paperback originals,” as is the case for most of what is known as “genre fiction” in the U.S. publishing market. (While Barron was published in the traditional sequence of hardcover followed by mass-marketed paperback, Elyot’s and O’Rourke’s novels were issued as trade paperback originals.) These three authors have evidently been influenced as well by the content and presentation of the recent screen adaptations of Austen’s novels, especially those adaptations’ tendency to improve the looks of Austen’s characters; to intensify the physical intimacy that accompanies their romances (an element that has attracted a great deal of critical attention); and to leach out Austen’s inimitable irony.

In 2003, Marjorie Garber coined the term the “Jane Austen syndrome” to encompass all of Austen’s manifestations in popular culture, from film adaptations to newspaper headlines to tea towels. While the forms of the Austen syndrome continue to multiply—if not to metastasize—it is arguably not a new illness. In 1905, Henry James attributed Austen’s popularity not to the “critical spirit” but to the “commercial,” as promoted by the “body of publishers, editors, illustrators, producers of the pleasant twaddle of magazines; who have found their ‘dear,’ our dear, everybody’s dear, Jane so infinitely to their material purpose, so amenable to pretty reproduction in every variety of what is called tasteful, and in what seemingly proves to be saleable, form” (230). The popular novels of Barron, Elyot, and O’Rourke present turn-of-the-millennium readers with new versions of “everybody’s Jane,” “private Austens” made public, whose faces reflect readers’ own desires.

“Miss Jane Austen is become an Adventuress”: Barron’s detective Jane

“A broken engagement, and now a murder trial?  What shall people say?  That Miss Jane Austen is become an Adventuress, and is not to be seen in polite society?”

“Nonsense, Henry,” Eliza said briskly; “Jane but seizes her chance for amusement when it is offered, as ever you would do; there is very little to choose between you, but your sex and the freedom it apportions to one and not the other.”  (Barron, Jane and the Unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor 250)

Of this trio of popular authors, Stephanie Barron is by far the most concerned with fidelity to the historical record. Barron’s Jane is always exactly where and among whom she should be, historically speaking, and her writing habits too accord with what we know of Austen’s composition sequence. (In a hoary conceit, Barron posits that these mysteries were also penned by Austen, with the long-lost manuscripts transported to America by a distant relative, where they were discovered in a manor house outside Baltimore and subsequently “edited” by Barron [Scargrave Manor viii]. Throughout her series, Barron displays, often in footnotes, considerable knowledge of Austen’s life, acquaintance, and writings—elements of which she frequently echoes, thereby inviting her readers to play detective as well.

The primary authority Barron claims for writing about Jane Austen—and indeed, through her first-person narrator, as Jane Austen—is that of a devoted reader. Barron’s biography at the back of each mystery describes her as “a lifelong admirer of Jane Austen’s work,” a phrase calculated to differentiation her both from scholars and from those whose love of Austen postdates the 1990s film adaptations.  Although Barron’s first mystery appeared in 1996—the year after the release of the Simon Langton/Andrew Davies Pride and Prejudice miniseries, the Ang Lee/Emma Thompson film Sense and Sensibility, and the Roger Michell/Nick Dear telefilm Persuasion—she in fact wrote the book, as she claims on her proprietary website, “well before. . . But the book’s publication in the spring of 1996 appeared perfectly timed to capitalize upon the rediscovery of Austen’s fiction. For this apparent prescience and monetary aim, I was at times
Certainly, it "becomes [her] as nothing has these four years, at least" (Persuasion). What's more, Barron asserts, the Austen we know would have relished such work, a pleasure we could, she implies, hardly wish to deny her: "a woman of her intellectual powers and perception of human nature would enjoy grappling with the puzzle presented by a criminal mind" (Scargrave Manor xi). Lest we balk at the idea of Austen not only solving but writing mysteries, Barron reminds us—in an evident allusion to Northanger Abbey—that "[n]ovel-writing, in Austen's day, was regarded as a frivolity, for the simple reason that it depicted life as it was actually lived—and because its primary readers were women. . . . Had she lived, Jane would be writing detective novels today" ("Detective").

Whether or not we agree with this assertion, it is certain that casting Austen as a sleuth ensures that Barron will decidedly overturn the received myth of Austen's life as being, in Emily Auerbach's words, "devoid of dramatic adventure" and romance (28). As a detective must, Barron's Jane observes dead bodies, takes part in investigations, testifies at inquests, and even fires a gun (at a target, not a person). She comes into direct contact with unsavory characters of every description and both genders: spies and traitors, courtesans and adulterers, smugglers and actresses. (Barron returns repeatedly to the Napoleonic context that famously remains offstage in Austen's published novels.) Finally, this Jane experiences attraction (serially) to several male characters, most lastingly to the spy and adventurer whom Barron calls the "Gentleman Rogue," Lord Harold Trowbridge, who dies at the end of the seventh installment, Jane and the Ghosts of Netley. When pausing from her detective work, this Jane Austen muses on exactly what her present-day general readers are most curious about: her opinion of herself, especially her looks and comparative poverty; her views on women's roles; and, of course, her thoughts on writing and on love.

With regard to her heroine's physical appearance, Barron departs from many recent, and not-so-recent, remakers of Austen by refusing to glamorize her. As Auerbach has most fully shown, visual images of Austen from the late nineteenth century until today have consistently softened her features, enhanced her hair, and even inflated her bosom (19-20). Not so in Barron's novels, where no one—not even Jane's beloved Cassandra or Lord Harold Trowbridge—ever comments admiringly on Jane's face or figure, and she has no illusions about her own appearance. Barron's Jane herself occasionally regrets the "redness" of her complexion (Scargrave Manor 187) and regularly, though not exhaustively, comments on the effects of her increasing age (she is twenty-seven in the first volume). As her thirtieth birthday approaches, she offers us a visual image of herself that is the fullest in Barron's series, in a passage decidedly reminiscent of Persuasion:

I wore a borrowed gown, made over in respect of the current season, that became me almost as much as it had graced Lizzy [her elegant sister-in-law] two summers before; my hair had been cut and dressed in curls all about my forehead, courtesy of the obliging Mr. Hall; and despite the closing of that decade beyond which a woman is commonly believed to cherish few hopes, I knew myself to be presently in good looks. I shall never again possess the bloom of eighteen; the bones of my face have sharpened of late, particularly about the nose, as tho' the flesh is stretched too tightly over it, and my complexion is coarser than it was ten years ago. But several months' trial of the air of Kent . . . will have their effect; and . . . my eyes were as bright as though I were embarked upon my very first ball. (Genius of the Place 130-31)

Throughout the series, Barron emphasizes, as here, the salutary contribution of a fine dress and hairstyle to both Jane's appearance and her self-esteem. This effect is most marked in Ghosts of Netley, where Jane eagerly welcomes the gift of an exceptionally flattering and fashionable mourning ensemble. Not only does the sight of herself in this costume spur her to "an admiration of [her] countenance and figure [she] had long since abandoned," but Lord Harold later remarks that it "becomes [her] as nothing has these four years, at least" (Ghosts of Netley 120, 208).

Whether mentioning gifts or purchases, Barron consistently stresses the expense of gentlewomen's self-presentation, an expense that Jane must be creative or lucky in order to avoid. The cost of the elegant mourning costume mentioned above is forty-eight guineas, which the dressmaker declares "a paltry sum" but which exceeds Jane's yearly income of fifty pounds (Ghosts of Netley 121). Wealth and beauty are, in this Jane's mind, intertwined and equally unattainable: "I cannot know," she states in the first volume, "what it is to be beautiful and possessed of easy means" (Scargrave Manor 38). Not all of the providers of cover images for the series have gotten this message: particularly egregious are Kinuko Y. Craft's recent covers for Ghosts of Netley and Lordship's Legacy, which portray Jane as a statuesque, curly-haired blonde.
Only Carol Inouye’s profile portraits of Jane for the first and second volumes present a pleasant-looking, though hardly beautiful, woman—albeit one whose sharp features and exaggeratedly almond eyes bear little resemblance to the face recorded by Cassandra in her c. 1811 sketch (reproduced in Auerbach 20).

While Barron’s Jane accommodates the strictures imposed by her lack of money and beauty, she refuses to resign herself to other expectations of women’s behavior. Barron singles out this quality at the outset of the series: “That she often felt frustrated by the limited experience and opportunity accorded women is evident in this manuscript [the first mystery] and elsewhere” (Scargrave Manor x). Challenged by a Frenchwoman who asks what a woman can do “in a proceeding so determined by men,” Jane replies, “I have never been willing to admit that inequality. . . . I spend the better part of my life endeavouring to redress it” (Man of the Cloth 210). Jane’s insistence on acting and speaking her mind earns her the censure of some. “How can you speak so lightly, Jane!” exclaims her cautious sister Cassandra on one occasion (Wandering Eye 142), while their mother, who approves of neither Jane’s fiction-writing nor her detective efforts, warns Jane sharply on another that she is “far too trusting and too independent of convention for [her] own good. People will talk” (Ghosts of Netley 31).

Yet this Jane is not without supporters, especially among her own male family members. Her father commends her in the warmest terms for her “fine understanding and natural courage” as well as her “faculties of determination and initiative” (Man of the Cloth 214), while her brother Edward declares, admiringly, “I swear you might almost be a man at times” (Genius of the Place 128). And, of course, Lord Harold values and encourages exactly the same qualities: as one of his associates informs Jane, Lord Harold considers her “to possess the keenest understanding in the world, and [to be] conversant in everything that one must, from convention, reserve solely to the affairs of men” (Genius of the Place 231).

In a broad sense, discussions in Barron’s series over the propriety of Jane’s detective activities stand in for debates about the propriety of Jane Austen’s authorship. Indeed, this must be the case, since until the publication of Sense and Sensibility—anticipated at the end of Barron’s last installment—only a few characters are aware of Jane’s secret efforts at novel-writing. That Cassandra is enthusiastic about her sister’s writings is evident, especially during her long conversation with Jane about The Watsons during its composition (Man of the Cloth 57-59). Jane’s mother, in contrast, dismisses her as but a “foolish, fanciful girl . . . forever writing her fancies in a little book” (Man of the Cloth 207)—one of many disparagements that recalls Mrs. Bennet’s deprecations of Elizabeth in Pride and Prejudice.

While Barron acknowledges Henry’s role in submitting Susan for publication, it is only through his having bragged about this novel to Lord Harold (Ghosts of Netley 87) that we can infer his own high opinion of his sister’s writing. Outside of Jane’s immediate family, no one but Lord Harold is aware of her compositions and ambitions—and he becomes so only after he has known her, and enlisted her assistance, for many years.

In Barron’s presentation, Jane is inconsistent and ambivalent in her ambitions for her writing. At the beginning of the series, having just rejected Harris Bigg-Wither’s proposal, Jane concentrates on the financial rewards possible through publication: “I must earn some independence,” she writes to Cassandra; “better to commerce in literature than in matrimony” (Scargrave Manor 10-11). Yet later, while writing Lady Susan, Jane claims that she “write[s] entirely for [her] own amusement” (Genius of the Place 196); her wit, she declares, will “sustain me—the secret sarcasms of my pen, that must subject even the greatest to my power, unbeknownst to themselves” (Genius of the Place 130). Still later, Jane informs Lord Harold that she “aspire[s] to a career as an authoress,” though she also disparages her four completed novels as not “fit to be read beyond the fireside circle” (Ghosts of Netley 87). Even when Sense and Sensibility is already in proof, Jane demurs when a friend characterizes her as “an artist,” saying, “I had never considered of myself in such exalted terms” (Barque of Frailty 31). In the same novel, publication—albeit a different sort—takes on a darker meaning when a Russian princess laments the unauthorized printing of her private letters as a “betray[al] of every sacred trust,” exposing her heart in “all the obscenity of print” (Barque of Frailty 184).

Jane’s uncertainty about publication is crucial to Barron’s own novels because it creates a role for an encourager: a role filled by Lord Harold. Yet Barron does not offer her readers an undiluted fantasy of beholding Jane Austen’s literary genius appreciated in her own lifetime. First, Lord Harold has not actually read Jane’s writing, only talked with her about it. And while he questions her intently about her composition, his ego nevertheless prompts him to wonder when he shall “meet [him]self in [her] prose” (Ghosts of Netley 89). His ego obtrudes, too, in his demand that she “entrust the manuscript of Susan to him once Crosby has returned it (Ghosts of Netley 91). Most problematically, he bequeaths to her his diaries and manuscripts, so that she can, he writes, prepare “a fair account of [his] life for the edification of posterity. . . . With such matter at hand, not even Jane may fail to write” (Lordship’s Legacy 23-4). Jane has earlier expressed to Lord Harold her conviction that “a young girl on the verge of womanhood” contains all that may be seen of
Barron comes closer to fulfilling her readers’ desire to see Jane Austen loved. Lord Harold’s last letter to Jane, which she reads only after his death, confirms his affection for her, a feeling based not on her looks but on her character. He has loved Jane, he concludes, for her “courage to be [herself], and not what convention would have [her] be” (Lordship’s Legacy 290). The physical aspect of Jane’s and Lord Harold’s intimacy Barron develops with restraint, especially in contrast to the romance-novel rhetoric that accompanies Jane’s experiences of being kissed in the first two volumes. All that Jane and Lord Harold share are a few hand clasps (during one of which “the current in his fingertips was so strong that I trembled,” reports Jane [Ghosts of Netley 221]; the other is a clutcher in his dying moment). Daringly, Barron appropriates a well-known phrase alluding to authorship from one of Jane Austen’s letters—“if I am a wild beast I cannot help it” (Ghosts of Netley 106)—to refer to Jane’s passion for Lord Harold.

The readerly fantasy that Barron addresses most fully, thanks to her choice of first-person narration, is that of sustained access to “Jane Austen” herself: her thoughts, her experiences, and of course her writing style. Like the many sequels invented for Austen’s novels, Barron’s mysteries allow readers to savor—if they are willing to suspend disbelief—an extension of Austen’s imaginative universe beyond her limited oeuvre. By having Jane recount adventures in which she has taken an active role, Barron gratifies her readers yet further with the sense that they are drawing closer to Austen’s “real” experience. On the back cover of the proof copy of Jane and the Ghosts of Netley, Bantam’s promotional division fueled this illusion of direct contact with “Jane Austen” by printing a letter to the reader signed “Your own dear Jane.”

Friends with Jane: Elyot’s foray into “Jane Austen’s England”

Who are your literary heroes? Who [sic] would you like to befriend in another life? (“Reader’s Group Guide,” Elyot 372)

By depicting a present-day woman meeting her literary idol, Amanda Elyot delves further into the fantasy of friendship with Jane Austen that Barron’s mysteries encourage. As Mary Ann O’Farrell has argued, this fantasy is shared to some degree by all Austen readers who “wonder what Jane Austen really was like.” To do so, O’Farrell argues, “is speculatively and tentatively to initiate the structure of identification and complementarity and difference that is friendship. Would she have liked me? Was she like me? Would she have challenged me or scared me? Shopped with me? Found me too much? Would I have liked those things? Is it possible she was writing to me?” (45). By a Lady reads as a direct answer to O’Farrell’s questions: Elyot’s heroine is delighted to find that yes, in fact, Jane Austen does like her, is like her, and will shop with her.

Jane Austen enters Elyot’s novel when its main plot is already well advanced. The heroine, C.J. (short for Cassandra Jane) Welles, is a New York actress cast as Jane Austen for a play titled By a Lady. After time-traveling to 1801 Bath, C.J. meets the woman whom her love interest the Earl of Darlington considers “a witty cousin,” and whom C.J. recognizes, “nearly swoon[ing],” as the Jane Austen: a “slender brunette who appear[s] to be in her early or midtwenties” (90-91). Alone among the Bath characters, C.J. is aware “that Miss Austen’s secret passion for ‘scribbling’ would one day place her in the pantheon of English novelists” (93).

Thrilled as C.J. is by being in her very presence, “Miss Austen” plays a relatively minor role in this novel—as, indeed, Elyot’s subtitle (“Being the Adventures of an Enlightened American in Jane Austen’s England”) suggests. After making C.J.’s acquaintance, Jane gossips with her at a ball, promenades with her on a fine day, shops with her for bonnets, and (much later) acts as godmother to C.J. and Darlington’s twin babies. Jane is, in essence, C.J.’s girlfriend—in the sense, of course, of a friend with whom one chats and goes shopping, not a lesbian partner. Subtlety is not Elyot’s mode in this novel, and she is hence quite direct in setting up this relationship: on their second meeting, Jane, “sensing a kindred spirit, took hold of C.J.’s hand. ‘I do believe we shall become great friends,’ she pronounced with assuredness” (139).

Jane’s appeal to C.J. is obvious. In addition to having prepared to incarnate Austen onstage in present-day New York—research that subsequently comes in handy when trying to pass in 1801—C.J. regards Austen as her “idol” and spending time in her company as “the fulfillment of one of her lifelong fantasies” (83, 152). When C.J. weighs the pros and cons of returning to the twenty-first century, “relinquishing the opportunity to befriend Jane Austen” is her second regret, right behind missing out on further intimacies with Darlington (97). Yet C.J.’s delight in Jane Austen’s company is distinctly mitigated, for the reader, by Elyot’s decision to construct dialogue for her Jane almost entirely out of excerpts from Austen’s letters, juvenilia, and novels. At best, this pastiche results in Elyot’s Jane seeming to speak of “courage and destiny” (Ghosts of Netley 89). Why should such a writer need the supposed inspiration of a rogue’s life? In the light of this legacy, Lord Harold’s dying words to Jane—“Promise me . . . you will write” (Ghosts of Netley 292)—sound like a curse.

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something slightly different than the other characters; at worst, she seems to be little more than an animated anthology of Austen quotations. To take but one example, Jane responds to C.J.'s near-swoon at first meeting her by cautioning her to “[b]eware of fainting fits . . . Run mad as often as you choose, but do not faint” (91). It is hardly surprising that C.J. is “flummoxed” by such an essentially random declaration.

In return for the pleasure of Jane’s company, C.J. serves her in two ways, both of which fulfill an additional readerly fantasy—not only, in O’Farrell’s words, “is it possible she was writing to me?” (45) but “is it possible she was writing because of me?” When C.J. bails Jane out after a shoplifting charge, the narrator makes plain that she does so not only as a friend but out of concern for Austen’s literary career: “if she were adjudged guilty, the Jane Austen that the world would come to consider one of the greatest chroniclers of her age would never be born” (256). Earlier in the same scene, in a unique dip into Jane’s point of view, Elyot sets up another way in which C.J. may be credited with making possible the publication of Austen’s novels. While “enviously eyeing an ivory satin evening reticule,” Jane imagines that

when all of England was reading Elinor and Marianne and First Impressions, she would be able to afford any of the luxuries Mr. Travers so temptingly displayed. If only she could overcome the writer’s block that had plagued her since her family had been compelled to retrench. She had found nothing to recommend Bath until she had made the acquaintance of Miss Welles. Perhaps now she might begin to regain her passion for storytelling. (253)

Elyot endows her Jane with no other motives for publishing her fictions than this desire for finery. (Indeed, Elyot never comments on the origins or significance of her own title, By a Lady.) That Jane is in need of a catalyst for writing comes as a surprise, furthermore, since C.J. and Darlington have earlier glimpsed her “making tiny notes with a pencil on a scrap of paper, which, upon noting their arrival, she immediately replaced without comment in her reticule” (155).

In addition to skirting the topic of Austen’s authorship, Elyot upholds the myth of Austen as a loveless single woman disappointed in her youthful romance. C.J. thinks on one occasion of Jane as “a tragic heroine” who “never moved on after losing Tom Lefroy,” and she wishes that she herself “did have the power to alter Jane’s romantic history” (170). On another occasion, C.J. blurs out to Jane that she, Jane, has “always believed in marrying for love or not at all,” a statement that the narrator identifies as “Miss Austen’s deepest personal credo” as well as a rare slip by the time-traveling heroine (248). Essentially, it is C.J.’s love life, not Austen’s, that is the subject of this novel. While Jane makes her “tiny notes” in the scene mentioned above, Darlington is bringing C.J. to “the very brink of ecstasy” in a nearby maze (154). The contrast is obvious: Miss Jane Austen writes alone, albeit pleasurably, while her time-traveling namesake indulges in passion. Thanks to Darlington’s surprising knowledge of the Kama Sutra, C.J. subsequently experiences ecstasy indeed.

Unlike Elyot’s novel, the play titled By a Lady whose production frames her tale does focus centrally on Austen’s love life. As described by a set designer, it is “a two-character play—a hypothetical story set in 1801 that . . . explore[s] what made The Woman become The Writer” (10). Because By a Lady (the novel) deals very little with the content of By a Lady (the play), Elyot gains less than she might from this meta-level. Crucially, however, Elyot attributes the beginning of her “own career as a novelist” (v) to the experience of performing (under the name Leslie Carroll) in a production of Howard Fast’s play The Novelist in 1996. Unlike Barron, who claims to have been inspired by a lifetime’s reading of Austen’s novels, Elyot’s interest in Austen emerged from a play that more than lives up to its subtitle, “A Romantic Portrait of Jane Austen.” It is no wonder that Elyot’s own portrayal of Austen—apart from the pastiche quotations and the novel’s epigraphs—engages little with Austen’s writings or life and undertakes no significant revision of Austen myths. Friendship with Jane Austen, Elyot suggests, exists essentially in one’s mind.

**Sleeping with Jane Austen? O’Rourke’s romantic heroine**

“All you’re really interested in is whether or not this Darcy character was sleeping with Jane Austen.”

“Who said anything about her sleeping with him?” Eliza angrily retorted. “I only said they may have written to each other.”

“Whatever!” Jerry shrugged to show that in his mind it really made no difference whether Darcy and Jane Austen were platonic lovers or depraved sex fiends. (O’Rourke 52-53)

Alone among these popular writers, Sally O’Rourke is candid both in her novel and in its prefatory material that she sees herself engaging with Jane Austen as a cultural presence as much as—and perhaps more than—Austen as a historical figure or author. “Jane Austen, Jennifer Ehle, and Colin Firth” share the novel’s dedication (v), and the narrative reinforces the sense that Austen is inextricable from her interpreters. In the world of O’Rourke’s novel, Austen is the subject of a blockbuster multimedia exhibit (somewhat improbably held at the New York Public Library) and “over a million and a half Web sites,” most maintained by her rabid fans.

As O’Rourke imagines her, Austen regrets having “experienced precious few romantic adventures” (197-98) and desires to remedy the lack. O’Rourke tantalizes the reader with scenes of deepening intimacy between Jane and the time-traveling Virginia gentleman (actually) named Fitzwilliam Darcy. Jane nurses the handsome, apparently comatose Darcy in her own bed after the horse-riding accident accompanying his arrival in 1810 Chawton. She later fantasizes
O'Rourke goes much farther than Elyot or Barron in remaking Austen as a beauty. First striking Darcy as “slender and . . . somewhat pretty,” Jane soon impresses him as being “much prettier than he had previously thought, with a firm but sensuous mouth, regular features framed by beautiful dark brown hair”—as well as fine eyes, here described as “spark[ling] in the light and seem[ing] to contain infinite depths of intelligence and understanding” (124-25). Darcy does not yet recognize this “pretty brunette” (132) as Jane Austen; when he does, he thinks anew “how extraordinarily attractive she was, bearing not the slightest resemblance to the poorly done sketch of a frumpy sixteen-year-old that was the only known portrait of Jane Austen to have survived into his time” (163). This gorgeous heroine, however, does not grace the novel’s cover: with a degree of subtlety uncharacteristic of the novel itself, O’Rourke’s publishers opted for an image of a placid country path.

Along with this Jane’s good looks comes a strong desire for love, and specifically for physical intimacy. Upon hearing from Darcy about the dating practices common in his own day, she asks him, to his amazement, to kiss her as he would his own contemporary. Given one kiss, she asks for “another, if you please” (215), and before long she is plotting, to Darcy’s surprise and delight, to spend the night with him before he attempts to reverse his time travel: “a night during which,” she thinks, “she would dare to become his lover in the flesh as well as in the spirit” (252). The night does not come to pass, but O’Rourke’s Jane takes comfort in knowing that she has been loved—and rewrites First Impressions to reflect her own recent romance, “impulsively scratching out entire passages, substituting new ones that had the unaffected ring of genuine experience to them, adding one name to the book, over and over again” (223).

As this passage indicates, O’Rourke is interested in Jane Austen the writer only as this role is affected by the adventures of Jane Austen the woman. While O’Rourke’s Jane does discuss her compositions with both Cassandra and Darcy, neither of these conversations strays far from the subject of love. Disagreeing with Cassandra about possible titles for First Impressions reminds Jane of her sister’s loss of her fiancé and her own envy of this “one great love” (139). Since this Jane, unlike those of Barron and Elyot, needs no reassurance to continue writing, she is little affected by Darcy’s revelation that “people will be reading [her] works 200 years from now. Scholars in great universities will devote entire careers to studying them” (202-03). Indeed, as an inducement to believe Darcy’s improbable story of time travel, Jane finds his digital watch more persuasive than his prophecy of her literary career.

In essence, O’Rourke’s Jane is a romance-novel heroine who herself becomes the author of the world’s most enduring romance novel, Pride and Prejudice. Constructing this version of Austen requires O’Rourke to re-envision not only the woman herself but the content of her most famous novel, the nature of her literary fame, and her status in current scholarship. Pride and Prejudice, in the estimation of O’Rourke’s present-day heroine Eliza Knight, is nothing more than a “timeless story of Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s uncompromising quest for a perfect love” (19). While Barron claims that Austen would write detective fiction if she were alive today, O’Rourke claims, in essence, that Austen did write the ur-romance novel. Romance and Romanticism blur in the minds of the characters, and seemingly of the author as well: a description, supposedly by a scholar, of Austen as “the greatest Romantic novelist in English literature” easily shades into the assertion that “[m]ost experts agree that Jane was the ultimate hopeless romantic” (62, 219). Academics are also to blame, apparently, for encouraging the belief that “Jane Austen peopled her novels with characters from her own life”: or, in the words of the expert who authenticates Eliza’s newly discovered Austen letter, “every schoolgirl who’s ever gotten hooked on P&P secretly suspects that the character [of Darcy] must have been drawn from the author’s personal experience” (27, 63).

O’Rourke fully acknowledges in her Foreword that she has penned “a fantasy, . . . just a dream,” one that “doubtless” involves “unconscionable liberties with the life and times of [the] illustrious author” (xi). Yet O’Rourke also enlists Austen in her own project, declaring that she “would like to think that Jane, of all people, would understand. And, at discovering herself playing the coveted role of the romantic heroine, even reward us with a smile” (xi). The fantasy thus comes full circle. Austen’s present-day admirers, saturated in images of her and versions of her work (recall the novel’s dedication to the stars of the Pride and Prejudice miniseries), offer as tribute to her a frothy love story of her own—and imagine her to be amused and grateful. What greater fantasy could be conceived, than that Jane Austen herself would endorse your own private Austen?

**Conclusion**

The novels of Barron, Elyot, and O’Rourke both take for granted and assuage a desire among general readers to experience a sense of personal connection with Jane Austen. Temporal and geographical distance seem not to matter,
Becoming Jane acknowledged to be its complete 1990s, has called Cassandra's portraits Austen. observations—and Patricia Rozema's her characters, commenting on Pride and

Of author Ray Smith, which deals with a Canadian academic who teaches nothing to do with the historical Austen, in spite of the implication. character in Paula Marantz Cohen's novels nothing to do with the historical Austen, in spite of the implication. As John Wiltshire cautions us, we academics too have been guilty of creating Austen in our own respective images, as "sassy, spunky, postcolonial, radical, transgressive, sexually complex and ambiguous" (9). Each of us has a private Austen, in other words, as our own writings reflect.

While all the works discussed in this essay illuminate and recreate aspects of the Jane Austen myth, only The Jane Austen Book Club does so in the form of literary fiction rather than the popular but critically disdained realm of genre fiction (mystery, romance, and fantasy). Austen awaits a literary reimagining such as was accorded Henry James—another enigmatic, virginal canonical author—by Colm Tóibín and David Lodge in 2004 in their complementary novels, The Master and Author, Author respectively.

Scholars may well take the popular novels of Barron, Elyot, and O'Rourke as proof that Austen has been engulfed at last by what Deidre Lynch has identified as "the leveling-down process, Americanization, and escapist pleasure-seeking" tendencies that were seen as threats to Austen in England between the wars ("At Home" 161). We would do well to remember, however, that Jane Austen has always been remade in ways that reflect current cultural and fictional conventions—and not only by her fans. Kathryn Sutherland's recent study of Austen's "textual lives" identifies some of the ways in which scholars and editors have participated in these remakings. As John Wiltshire cautions us, we academics too have been guilty of creating Austen in our own respective images, as "sassy, spunky, postcolonial, radical, transgressive, sexually complex and ambiguous" (9). Each of us has a private Austen, in other words, as our own writings reflect.

NOTES

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1. Fowler says as much in her own voice in her acknowledgments, where she identifies her own private Austen as the one "who showed her work to her friends and family and took such obvious pleasure in their responses. Thanks most of all to her, then, for those renewable, rereadable, endlessly fascinating books and everything that's been written about them" (288). See also Fowler's essay "Jane and Me."

2. An exception is the character Prudie's dream of an elegant present-day Jane—"blond, neat, modern. Her pants are silk and have wide legs" (Fowler 115)—who helps dispose, psychologically at least, of Prudie's own difficult mother.

3. A bestseller in both its hardback and paperback forms, with a film version (released in 2007) starring a distinguished cast, The Jane Austen Book Club certainly deserves to be called popular, though it is literary rather than genre fiction.

4. Laura Levine's series of mysteries starring "Jaine Austen," which began with the 2002 novel This Pen for Hire, has nothing to do with the historical Austen, in spite of the provocative similarity in name. Nor does Austen appear as a character in Paula Marantz Cohen's novels Jane Austen in Boca and Jane Austen in Scarsdale, in spite of the titles' implication.

5. O'Rourke's The Man Who Loved Jane Austen is not to be confused with a 1999 novel of the same title by the Canadian author Ray Smith, which deals with a Canadian academic who teaches and writes on Austen's novels. An earlier version of O'Rourke's novel was published in a limited issue in 2000, with authors given as "Michael O'Rourke and Sally Smith."

6. Recent reimaginings of Jane Austen are not confined to fiction, of course. An American musical-theatre version of Pride and Prejudice (premiered in 2006) by Lindsay Warren Baker and Amanda Jacobs places Jane Austen onstage with her characters, commenting on the composition of the novel; her first song is titled "The Creaking Door." Some might put Patricia Rozema's 1999 Mansfield Park in this category as well, since Rozema notoriously assigns many of Austen's own observations—and indeed writings—to Fanny; in my view, though, this strategy has the effect of reinterpreting Fanny, not Austen.

7. For a consideration of Austen as a character in fiction and film post-2006, see Wells, "The Closeness of Sisters."

8. Emily Auerbach (19-23) and Kathryn Sutherland (110-17) each analyze visual representations of Austen, from Cassandra's portraits to more recent depictions.

9. Roger Sales, commenting on the status of the Austen myth in England from the bicentenary of her birth to the early 1990s, has called attention to efforts to "juxtapose the subject of sex with a cultural icon that was universally acknowledged to be its complete antithesis" (14). See John Halperin's "Jane Austen's Lovers" and Jon Spence's Becoming Jane Austen for scholarly readings of Austen's life that emphasize its amorous side.

11. Such generic heterogeneity is also, according to Wiltshire, a hallmark of lives of Jane Austen, which meld “biography, criticism and romance” (25).

12. These changes to Austen have been much discussed by critics of the films; see in particular the essays in Jane Austen in Hollywood and Jane Austen on Screen.

13. Titles of Barron’s mysteries will subsequently be abbreviated, e.g. Scargrave Manor.

14. Barron is not alone in casting a well-known author in the role of detective: Aristotle, Benjamin Franklin, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and O. Henry have all been so honored (by Margaret Doody, Robert Lee Hall, William J. Palmer [in whose novels Dickens and Collins collaborate], and Steven Saylor, respectively). To my knowledge, Laura Joh Rowland is the only mystery writer other than Barron to have chosen a canonical female author as her sleuth: see The Secret Adventures of Charlotte Brontë (2008) and Bedlam: The Further Secret Adventures of Charlotte Brontë (2010). Though no author character is involved, mention should be made of Carrie Bebris’s mystery novels starring Elizabeth Darcy (née Bennet) and her husband, a series that began with Pride and Prescience (2003).

15. In contrast, other authors of Austen-related books emphasize their academic credentials: the author’s note on the jacket of Lauren Henderson’s Jane Austen’s Guide to Dating (2005) identifies her as having written “her dissertation on courtship rituals in Jane Austen” at Cambridge.

16. Indeed, Barron declares—how seriously, it is hard to tell—that her intensive rereading of Austen’s novels initially gave her the sense that she “heard voices” and was “channeling Jane” (“Detective”).

17. Compare the claims by contemporary writers of “chick lit” that they follow in Austen’s footsteps; see Wells, “Mothers of Chick Lit?” Snobbery about genre fiction, especially science fiction, is a recurrent topic in The Jane Austen Book Club, where Grigg—the character best read in science fiction—also imagines Austen writing a sitcom called “The Elinor Show,” to the dismay of Fowler’s other characters (50).

18. This dressmaker also offers us an assessment of one aspect of Jane’s physique that is unique in the series: “She has the bosom for it—the sash should go high under the arms, to frame her décolleté” (Ghosts of Netley 120).

19. The Mrs. Austen characters in the films Becoming Jane and Miss Austen Regrets are, similarly, based on Mrs. Bennet, and hence are more concerned with marrying Jane off than understanding or supporting her literary ambitions.

20. Kissed “full upon the mouth” by a opportunist man in the first installment, Jane experiences first “shame” and “mortification” and then dizziness with “a want I cannot admit, even to myself” (Scargrave Manor 200-201); she enjoys a “crushing embrace” and passionate kiss with the object of her affections, a smuggler, in the next installment (Man of the Cloth 253).

21. As transcribed by Le Faye, Austen’s sentence reads, “If I am a wild Beast, I cannot help it” (24 May 1813).

22. Austen’s imaginative universe has been extended in another way by the authors of Pride & Promiscuity: The Lost Sex Scenes of Jane Austen (2001), who play on the myth of Austen as a sexless spinster.

23. Elyot’s publisher makes a somewhat grander (though vague) claim, on the back cover, that this novel is “[a] tale of time travel, true love, and Jane Austen.” Viewers of the cover image, which depicts a sultry woman in Regency dress against a backdrop of New York’s Times Square, could reasonably assume that the book deals with Austen’s adventures in New York.

24. Marjorie Garber has called attention to the popular tendency to treat both Austen and Shakespeare as mere repositories of quotations (203-204).

25. Readers of The Jane Austen Book Club will be reminded of the Magic 8-Ball that Allegra stocks with Austen quotations; characteristically, Fowler relishes the absurdity of the idea that a major author would speak to you personally and meaningfully, an idea that is taken quite seriously by Elyot.

26. Given the common ground, mentioned earlier, between Austen and Shakespeare as figures in popular culture, it is perhaps worth noting that Darlington shows C.J. his First Folio just before their tantric sex commences (Elyot 181).

27. One comment by the director of C.J.’s play bears more irony now, following the casting of Anne Hathaway in Becoming Jane: “I don’t want to star-fuck, Harvey. I told you that when you brought me in on the project. I can see the adverts now: ‘J-Lo is Jane Austen.’ The reason I don’t want a celebrity in the role is that I don’t want audiences to equate
Jane Austen, who ought to be enough of one in her own right, with some Hollywood flavor of the month” (Elyot 104).

28. These epigraphs are Austen’s comments in a letter to James Stanier Clarke about how she could not attempt a “serious Romance” (1 April 1816) and Sir Edward’s remarks in Sanditon—which Elyot quotes as if they represent Austen’s own views—about novels that treat “the progress of strong passion” (Minor Works 403).

29. Those acquainted with Austen’s music-making and her relationship, in her life and novels, with the cultural ideal of the “accomplished woman”—which I discuss in “In Music She Had Always Used to Feel Alone in the World”—will notice another of O’Rourke’s marked improvements of Austen. According to the historical record, Austen was a serviceable pianist who preferred English tunes and undemanding solo pieces; here, she is a veritable Jane Fairfax, playing “a series of increasingly difficult pieces by Mozart and Haydn, all of which she performed with admirable style. . . . ‘Your sister is very accomplished,’” Darcy tells Cassandra, “for he was genuinely impressed with Jane’s mastery of the instrument” (O’Rourke 180).

30. Kensington has since re-issued The Man Who Loved Jane Austen with a very different cover, one that more clearly signals romance novel: a darkly handsome man broodily gazes at a woman who apparently is wearing a white wedding dress.

31. For other readings of Pride and Prejudice as a forerunner of present-day romance novels, see Crusie and Regis.

32. See the essays of D. Michael Kramp, who concentrates on Austen’s reception in the mid-nineteenth-century United States, and Mary A. Favret, who examines the roots of Austen’s appeal to American readers in terms of the author’s presentation of what “might be named, loosely, freedom and the pursuit of happiness” (168). Critics remind us that Austen’s most enthusiastic and influential readers have not always been overwhelmingly female: see Clara Tuite and William Galperin, as well as Johnson, “The Divine Miss Jane.”

33. Barron, Elyot, and O’Rourke are all active as genre-fiction writers outside their Austen novels. Barron followed her Austen series with historical novels about Queen Victoria and Virginia Woolf; under the name Francine Mathews, she has also published a mystery series set in present-day Nantucket. Elyot is the author of several historical romances as well as (under the name Leslie Sara Carroll) several light contemporary novels. O’Rourke has recently published two romance-inflected novels with contemporary settings.

WORKS CITED


Jane Austen was an English novelist whose works of romantic fiction, set among the landed gentry, earned her a place as one of the most widely read writers. Jane Austen lived her entire life as part of a close-knit family located on the lower fringes of the English landed gentry. Austen's works critique the novels of sensibility of the second half of the 18th century and are part of the transition to 19th-century realism. Her plots, though fundamentally comic, highlight the dependence of women on marriage to secure social standing and economic security. View Popular Fiction Research Papers on Academia.edu for free. With a deceptive ease, Gelder breaks new ground in treating popular fiction as a distinctive cultural field with its own logic. The result is a rare combination of clarity and accessibility and challenging insight. Tony Bennett. Open more. "With a deceptive ease, Gelder breaks new ground in treating popular fiction as a distinctive cultural field with its own logic. Starting in 1996 with Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary and Candace Bushnell's Sex and the City, chick lit broke with some well-established romance conventions such as the one man-one woman ratio or the unrestricted focus on the quest for great love in preference to portraying professional women who dated several men."