

# BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by George Justice

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## Novelist on Novelist

### Jane Austen

By Carol Shields.  
Viking Penguin, 2001. 182 pages.  
Hardcover. \$19.95.

#### Reviewed by Linda Relias.

In the new Penguin Lives biography *Jane Austen*, Carol Shields offers a sympathetic interpretation of Austen's life and work. A distinguished writer herself, Shields won the Pulitzer Prize in 1995 for *The Stone Diaries* and is a member of JASNA in Canada. She spoke at the 1996 AGM with her daughter. *Jane Austen* is the biography of a novelist by a novelist. Shields blends her fascination with Austen's development as a writer with an acutely sensitive psychological portrait.

She begins with the young Jane's exceptional familial environment, connecting Austen's interest in novels with the family's group readings of this relatively new literary form. Shields emphasizes that even as a child Austen considered herself a novelist. She then devotes considerable attention to Austen's thwarted romance with Tom Lefroy. As her brothers married and her friends paired off, Jane had to face a crucial dilemma, "Was it better to be alone and in some sense intact? Or better to be coupled--compromised, denied freedom, but awarded the respect of society?" Shields depicts Jane as "the literary daughter, the writer of novels, the ironic, spiky daughter," misunderstood and embroiled in complicated family dynamics. As Austen grew older, she grew more isolated and dedicated herself to writing.

Shields devotes a chapter to Jane's precarious position in the family as a dependent sister with an allowance of 20 pounds a year. In the incomplete novel *The Watsons*, she creates characters close to her own life. The daughters are unmarried and poor, while the father is an ailing clergyman. Shields suggests the book was left unfinished because it was too close to her personal situation, having been written in Bath when her spirits were low.

Although *Jane Austen* does not have the breadth of Claire Tomalin's biography, its relative brevity allows for a focus on the fusion of Austen's life and art. Shields suggests, for example, that *Persuasion* is a darker novel than her earlier works because "its use of accident and near misses relates to a kind of fatalism that stared down at her, suggesting that she might be desperately rewriting the trajectory of her own life..." All of the happy endings and the second chances she gave her heroines are opportunities that she would never have. "Her heroines claimed their lives through ideal marriages, while she found her own sense of arrival through her novels."

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