

A Labor of Love

Critical Companion to Jane Austen: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work

By William Baker.

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32 B/W illustrations. Hardcover. \$75.

Reviewed by Sarah S. G. Frantz.

The *Critical Companion to Jane Austen* is obviously a labor of love for its author, William Baker, and he has managed to produce an invaluable resource for teachers and scholars of Austen. Baker achieves his wide-ranging and ambitious goals: “The aim of this book is to help readers and students of Jane Austen in their endeavor to enjoy and understand her work and to make sense of the vast amount of literature on her. The book also provides scholars and advanced students with a convenient, accessible reference source.”

The *Critical Companion* is truly comprehensive. It begins with a substantial biography of Austen. The bulk of the volume consists of comprehensive discussions of all of Austen’s texts, listed in alphabetical order, starting with “The Adventures of Mr. Harley,” a three-paragraph satiric narrative recorded in *Volume the First*, and ending with *The Watsons*, Austen’s unfinished novel written in Bath. While it is slightly surreal to see texts like Austen’s “Scraps” from *Volume the Second* receive the same treatment as her six major novels, this balanced, logical, and well-ordered approach adds to the value of the volume.

Strangely enough, the only text that does not receive this treatment is Austen’s letters. Discussed in fewer than two pages, the entry on Austen’s letters does not examine, for instance, why Cassandra destroyed so many letters, nor does it discuss the views of Austen as a person that we glean from some of her more

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“An invaluable resource”



scathing denunciations of her neighbors and acquaintances. This lack is puzzling in an otherwise sterling work of research.

The discussion of each major novel starts with an examination of its “Composition and Publication” history, continues with a “Synopsis” of each volume, followed by an exhaustive “Critical Synopsis and Commentary” for each chapter, which details themes and subtexts, sometimes paragraph by paragraph. These notes are very similar to *Cliff Notes* or *Spark Notes*. While they might delve into the hidden economic meaning behind Mr. Bennet’s appellation of his wife as “My dear” in fascinating ways, they might easily be misused by students in place of thinking for themselves about Austen’s subtle nuances and meaning—although that is obviously not a fault of the *Companion* itself.

The “Critical Commentary” for each novel summarizes reviews and major scholarly analyses, from the first mentions in Austen’s own compilation of her family’s and friends’ responses to her novels, to reviews and commentary that span two centuries, hitting all the major critics from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Sir Walter Scott, Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, Lionel Trilling, D.W. Harding, Marvin Mudrick, Marilyn Butler, Edward Said, Claudia Johnson). This section is helpful in noting broad trends in academic criticism about Austen and her novels. The discussions of each novel finish with a list and description of every character mentioned in the novel, including a list of which chapters they appear in and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources specific to that work.

The volume finishes with an encyclopedia-style “Related Entries” section that explains aspects of Austen’s life and

works, including her family members and professional contacts, geographical points of interest, items of everyday interest like dancing, food, and clothes, as well as more modern concerns such as Janeites and film adaptations of her work. The “Appendix” includes a chronology of her life and works and primary and secondary bibliographies.

On a technical level, the volume could have been appreciably improved by a competent copy editor. Blatant typographical errors (“form” for “from,” and more egregiously “Weinsheimer” for “Weisenfarth”) mar the reading experience. Baker’s tendency to include all page numbers for quotes collectively at the end of a paragraph, rather than after each individual quote, makes it difficult to match page numbers to correct quotations.

Another drawback of the text—and this is more a future drawback for scholars than an inherent fault of the *Companion*—is that it uses R. W. Chapman’s Oxford editions as the standard version of Austen’s work. The wonderful *Cambridge Editions* of Austen’s work “appeared too late to be included as the base text” of this volume. If and when the *Cambridge Editions* are designated the standard text of the scholarly Austen community, quotes will be that much more difficult to find.

All this said, it’s a pity that the “Biography”—the first section of the main text—begins thus: “Jane Austen’s afterlife is easier to document than her actual life. The paucity of biographical information on her is limited and largely dependent on family records.” A “limited paucity” would be a wonderful thing in Jane Austen’s case, because we would then know a lot more about her: in this scenario, Cassandra would have left her sister’s letters intact. Sadly, that is not the case, and beginning this informative, meticulously researched volume with such a glaring error is unfortunate at best and at worst makes one question the value of the rest of the book.