

Jane Austen in Essence

The Immortal Jane Austen

By Maggie Lane.

D. Allison (UK), 2008.

48 pages. Color, B/W illustrations. Paperback. £4.99.

Available from The Jane Austen Centre
(www.janeaugen.co.uk)

Reviewed by Elsa A. Solender

Maggie Lane has a felicitous talent for communicating large amounts of information accurately and economically in a neat, lucid style. She knows virtually everything there is to know about Jane Austen's life and family, and has a solid, no-nonsense appreciation of her literary achievement and reputation. Thus, Lane's new booklet, *The Immortal Jane Austen*, seems to fulfill in almost every way its purpose as a brief, intelligent, highly readable introduction to the life and works of Austen. It is not too much, not too little, but just right.

This 48-page paperback volume is precisely what one might wish to give to a neophyte who has encountered an Austen novel for the first time, or to a visitor to one of the Austen sites in what is now known to tourists (to the amusement of the denizens of Hampshire) as "Jane Austen Country." For institutions such as the Jane Austen Visitor Centre in Bath (which seems to have commissioned the work) and The Jane Austen Museum in Chawton Cottage, it is "just the thing"



to offer for sale to visitors, not a heavy, expensive hardbound tome, but a slim, inexpensive, engaging "next step" on the road towards knowing and loving Jane Austen.

The book presents all the known facts of the author's life, carefully labeling fact as fact and speculation as speculation. Those whose impression of Austen's romantic experience may have been formed by the medium of on-screen fantasy may be disillusioned to learn that Tom Lefroy, so winningly and wittily portrayed by James McAvoy on film, was not the great love of her life. On the other hand, those who have viewed her as a bitter old maid who never had a chance at marriage and family and took out her anger and frustration in her prose may be chagrined to discover that she did indeed receive at least one eligible (though problematic) proposal of marriage, which she initially accepted, then thought better of, and that she may also have had, according to fairly reliable family reports, a short-lived romance that ended with the sudden death of the gentleman.

Brief, well-focused accounts and appreciations of all the Austen novels as well as the history of their composition and publication are included, as are references to letters and other writings. There is a pleasant sprinkling of illustrations from the novels, as well. I would have liked to see a timeline chart of the events of Austen's life and the composition/publication history of the novels, but that may be too finicky on my part since the essential information is weaved gracefully through the book; still, a chart would have made it a handier reference for more knowledgeable Austen enthusiasts. A brief bibliography of good source materials or a list of recommended further readings beyond those of Maggie Lane herself would also have been welcome. Lane would be as a good guide as any to point a reader toward valuable further readings.

Anyone who might believe that Jane Austen looked like Anne Hathaway

or Keira Knightley will likely be disappointed. Sadly, however, the reader of *The Immortal Jane Austen* will not see in this booklet the only widely

recognized image of the author made during her lifetime, an (apparently) unflattering watercolor sketch by her sister, Cassandra. That likeness is referenced, but not reproduced in this book. Instead, a reader may see several versions of the familiar but bland, prettified, posthumous portrait that was commissioned by the author's family. It was clearly influenced by Victorian aesthetic sensibilities that seem quite foreign to Austen's own art and personality. Also reproduced is another, equally unflattering (for different reasons) color portrait commissioned recently by the Bath Centre from a forensic artist. To my eyes, it makes Austen look like a rather florid tart, and to others, the spitting image of the Irish actress Fiona Shaw. The curious reader must go either to The National Portrait Gallery in London to see the Cassandra sketch (or to one of the many picture postcards that have added mightily to the coffers of that institution) or to any number of other biographies or histories that have reproduced it. There are, however, among the profuse and interesting illustrations in the book, fine images of Austen's parents and siblings, and of some of her nieces and nephews, fashion plates, views of the homes and localities where she resided or visited, and the original memorial plaque at her grave in Winchester Cathedral.

Except for these few minor quibbles, *The Immortal Jane Austen* is a very nice little book that would be the ideal accompaniment to a gift of, say, *Pride and Prejudice*, for a fortunate young reader.

Elsa A. Solender was President of JASNA from 1997–2000.

