

Jane Austen: Magnificent Obsession

Why Jane Austen?

By Rachel M. Brownstein.
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Review by Elsa Solender.

Rachel Brownstein, Professor of English at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) has written three books in one, each component connected to her title question, “Why Jane Austen?”

Many a passionate and perplexed devotee of Brontë or Byron has wondered why Jane Austen became *the* 20th and 21st-century literary cult figure. Why *she* captured the imagination and loyalty of legions of readers, including romanticists, fantasists, a coterie of scholars, and a cohort of virtually unlettered teenaged girls. Brownstein’s impressionistic yet comprehensive account of Austen enthusiasm, past and present, includes what she calls—with no little scorn—*Jane-o-mania*, her term for banal, exploitative variations on the loosely understood theme of Jane Austen in our era. Her coinage—new to me—differs somewhat from Janeite, Janeism, Austenmania, or Janemia, each with its own pejorative connotations. (In Googling “Jane-o-mania,” one is linked to Brownstein’s book and the Facebook page of a twenty-something named Jane Omania).

Brownstein’s account of the Austen craze includes personal encounters she has had with academic and artistic colleagues in such high-toned settings as the Bellagio retreat in Italy, as well as others with lesser beings in less distinguished circumstances, such as a taxi en route to a JASNA conference. Some arouse her headshaking wonder at the width and breadth and staying power of Jane-love. She is particularly persuasive describing the peculiarly intimate, possessive relationship that many Austen enthusiasts have, the secret conviction that they alone properly appreciate her. Indeed, in her

skepticism about non-academic fans—especially those in Regency costumes—Brownstein betrays a similar tinge of exclusionary possessiveness.

Under her critical microscope pass a parade of filmed adaptations, scholarly expositions and critiques, and, of course, sequels, prequels, send-ups, tea cloths, vampires, zombies, sea monsters, werewolves, and—not to be overlooked—the Jane Austen action figure adorning the cover of her book. That playful book jacket is ironically intended; it does not signal lack of seriousness or sophistication on the pages within, although her graceful, entertaining prose is blessedly free of the reductive literary jargon now regarded as *de rigueur* in some academic journals.

Undergraduates of the Twitter age assigned to read their first Austen novel echo Brownstein’s title query in a different tone: “Why Jane Austen? Why do I have to read *her*?” Brownstein deftly “sells” Jane Austen—the “fabric of her words”—along with the frequently misunderstood scope and seriousness of her subject:

I read the opening paragraphs aloud so the students can savor the slow, graduated elongation of the “e” from the short indeterminate grunt in the words [*Emma*] starts with (“Emma” and “the best blessings of existence”) to the long emphatic screech with the “e’s” in “real evils.” If they seem attentive and I’m on a roll, I inform them...that the “e” in Mr. Knightley’s name distinguishes it from the word it derives from...I point out that the dropped “e” in “Donwell Abbey” is what saves it from being too simply, overly allegorically named “Done Well” ... [W]ith graduate students, rereaders, I always manage to get to the conversation at Box Hill and Mr. Weston’s spelling “Emma” with the letters “M” and “A” minus the initial “e.”... I find myself preaching that paying attention to each and every detail

leads the attentive reader to the truth. That Jane Austen writes fiction, but she doesn’t lie.

Brownstein’s third and final iteration of her *Why Jane Austen?* theme elevates her book beyond the survey or “how to” genre. The title here echoes the final, incomplete, yet seminal 1975 essay of the influential Columbia University critic Lionel Trilling, “Why We Read Jane Austen.” “I stand on Trilling’s tweedy shoulders here with trembling knees,” she admits, before fearlessly challenging some of his assertions and conclusions from the vantage point of thirty-five years of intensive scrutiny of the novels, including those in her own previous book, *On Becoming a Heroine*. Boasting “no bright new take on Jane Austen,” her position is simply that Jane Austen is “a great writer, delightful to read.” She proves her case eloquently through textual analyses, dazzling riffs on Austen’s usage of the words “understanding” and “information” in *Emma*.

Brownstein’s tendency to consign non-professional Austen enthusiasts and gatherings (especially the costumed ones) to the category of “assorted Jane Austen groupies” may be a trifle off-putting for some in JASNA, but her brilliant critical insights and comprehensive survey of Austen studies—including its excesses—merit a wide readership. She has much to teach about Austen – and may be surprised to recognize among JASNA’s costumed revelers some of the very colleagues whose work she cites admiringly.

Note: *Brownstein mentions in her acknowledgements my encouragement of her work on Jane Austen.*

Elsa Solender, a former president of JASNA, is the author of the forthcoming Amazon Kindle e-book Jane Austen in Love: An Entertainment.

