

The Many Loves of Jane Austen

Jane Austen in Love: An Entertainment

By Elsa Solender.

Amazon Digital Editions, 2012. 319 pages.
Kindle. \$6.99.

Amazon Create Space, 2012. 368 pages.
Paperback. \$12.99.

Both are available from Amazon.com.

Review by Deborah Barnum.

Imagine a young Jane Austen reading aloud her *History of England*, Cassandra sketching Henry as Henry V, their Mother as Elizabeth I, and Jane as Mary Queen of Scots; or young Jane at school nearly dying of typhus; or hearing Jane's thoughts on first encountering Madame Lefroy; or sparking a laugh from the intimidating Egerton Brydges. Imagine the suitor you might like your Jane Austen to meet by the seaside, she falling madly in love but destined to suffer the pangs of lost love, forever irreplaceable. If your mind tends to such as you try to fill in the many blanks in Austen's life, you might find that Elsa Solender, in her *Jane Austen in Love: An Entertainment*, has done a wondrous job of doing it for you.

Ms. Solender, former president of JASNA and a prize-winning journalist, has taken her story "Second Thoughts," runner-up in the 2009 Chawton House Library

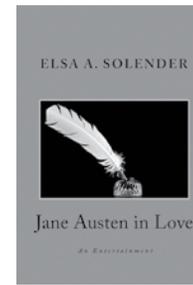


First time AGM attendees Jason Flay and Nadia Vedder of the Syracuse Region at an English Country Dance workshop.

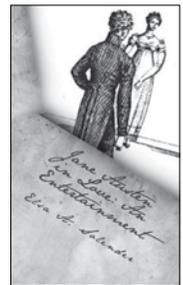
Short Story Contest, and expanded this one moment in Austen's life to other places and times, all through the lens and voice of Cassandra Austen—it is part real, part imaginary, and part Austen's own fiction, dialogue and story all beautifully woven together in this tribute to love in the life of Jane Austen—her love for her sister, her family, her cousin Eliza, and her mentor and friend Madam Lefroy; her flirtation with Tom Lefroy; the proposal from Bigg-Wither; and her Mysterious Suitor of the Seaside.

This is Cassandra's story, a Cassandra in later years, recollecting and musing, telling her own and Jane's tale, allowing us to be privy to Jane's experiences and perceptions that led her to pen her great, witty, romantic tales. In Part I, "An Uncommon Girl," we are introduced to young Jane at the family evenings of playacting and reading her own juvenile jottings; we see her at school in Southampton and later at the Abbey School forming her opinions of schoolmistresses and governesses; and we see her powers of observation, her mind at work, picking and sorting through the people of her world. As Solender intersperses text from Austen's letters and novels with her own imaginary "facts," we find Mrs. Bennet's nerves in Mrs. Austen, Mr. Bennet in her father's advice; we meet an Eliza, the older enchanting cousin, teaching both sisters "the secret language of the fan" and other lessons in "the games of love" and how Jane learns the importance and the dangers of *gossip*; we learn of "Sophia Sentiment" and the Rice Portrait, and all manner of Austen family history; we hear echoes of William Elliot's "idea of good company" and meet her neighbors Mrs. and Miss *Gates* complete with Mr. Knightley's "badly done indeed"—all alerting us—we are in the middle of a literary treasure hunt!

In Part II, "A Suitable Partner," we enter the world of Jane's "profligate and shocking" behaviors with Tom Lefroy and his insufferable *white coat*, a "Becoming Jane" but far more realistic. Cassandra's real life loss of her fiancé Tom Fowle



Paperback Cover



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and subsequent decision never to marry is told in such a true voice, we feel this unbearable tragedy ourselves. And the "Mysterious Gentleman," the one unknown in Austen's life most speculated on as the basis for every one of her fictional heroes. Solender gives us William Darby: he is Austen's dearest brothers; he is Henry Tilney here, a touch of Willoughby there, he is Darcy, Wentworth, and Knightley, and dare I say a bit of Edmund Bertram?! He is the reason Austen has her "Second Thoughts," the story retold here of her acceptance of and next-day rejection of Harris Bigg-Wither, a story in Jane's voice, her inner life laid bare as she struggles with the choices before her.

In this fanciful imaginary rendering of "Jane Austen in Love," the end does not change—Austen dies far too early, other loves to embrace, other works to be written denied her, and in Cassandra's final voiced words of grief, we can well believe that this narration is just the way it was, her seaside suitor just as we think she deserved, and its outcome the reason the world was given an unmarried Jane, the woman who would devote her observant eye and ironic voice to the pen.

There are certainly dangers in such confections, where fiction and biography meet and the reader cannot decipher the "Truth"—but as all "history" is indeed often just a 'story,' this is one such tale to savor, an "entertainment" indeed, sans zombies and fangs. Just imagine!

Deborah Barnum, a former law librarian, now owner of *Bygone Books* in Burlington, VT, is the regional coordinator for the JASNA Vermont Region, author of the Jane Austen in Vermont blog, and compiler of the annual "Jane Austen Bibliography" for *Persuasions*.