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Review of Everybody's Jane: Austen in the Popular Imagination

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Review of *Everybody's Jane: Austen in the Popular Imagination*

Comments

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WELLS, JULIETTE. *Everybody's Jane: Austen in the Popular Imagination.* New York: Continuum, 2011. 246 pp. \$29.95.

The question “What does Jane Austen mean to you?” opens and closes this book that attempts to understand how readers, scholars, and fans of Jane Austen connect with her legacy in the twenty-first century. In 1905, Henry James disparaged “the body of publishers, editors, illustrators [and] producers of the pleasant twaddle of magazines[,] who have found their ‘dear, our dear, everybody’s dear, Jane so infinitely to their material purpose, so amenable to pretty reproduction in every variety of what is called tasteful, and in what seemingly proves to be saleable, form” (3). Wells is therefore determined to distinguish between Jane Austen’s “fans” (who generally use her first name, endearingly) and “scholars” (who refer to her by her last name, as they would any author) and focuses on “amateur” or “everyday” readers: “By investigating with open minds how ordinary people encounter Austen, we gain an unprecedented view of the significance of reading and of ‘classic’ literature” (8).

As Wells explains in her extensive introductory chapter, “Austen’s ever-growing popularity and market share” has spawned new books, screen and stage adaptations, museums and exhibits. Wells considers “how ordinary people think about Austen today, and why they find it rewarding to do so” (4), not only those who read the novels, but also those who watch films or read original fiction based on Austen’s novels and world. She studies the literary tourists who visit the various sites where Austen lived, visited, and wrote her novels, as well as those who imagine those visits. She considers the dedicated collector of Austen relics as well as the blogger and the self-publisher of Austen-inspired fiction. These constituents comprise what she refers to as “the popular imagination.”

In the subsequent chapters, Wells uses representative examples rather than trying to be comprehensive, and takes popular sources on their own terms and with their own expectations and conventions. The second chapter contains a short biography of Austen lover and collector Alberta H. Burke, whom Wells refers to as an “Austen omnivore.” Alberta’s ten scrapbooks—though they reveal the workings of a devoted amateur reader of Austen—are, “in their idiosyncratic way, manuscript works of amateur scholarship” (49). Many photographs of the notebooks and other Burke artifacts are included in the volume and provide the reader a glimpse into the extensive library she bequeathed to Goucher College. Although “of another era,” Alberta might be considered “a direct forerunner of post-1995 Austen fans,” the large Austen following that came after the film adaptation wave of the mid-1990s (59).

Wells then looks more carefully at the current amateur readers in her third chapter, considering Oprah Winfrey’s influence, which popularized “experiential aspects of reading and frame[d] it as an activity that can be both enjoyable and therapeutic” (70). She chronicles several self-help style Austen-inspired books that make the six published novels personal, adapting them to the individual needs of the various readers. Readers and writers are also drawn to scores of Austen-inspired fictional works, “both created by and intended for those who engage imaginatively rather than critically with what they read or view” (94). Throughout her book, Wells is careful not to disparage the seriousness of these publications or their readers, considering the industry as another way to understand the deep and lasting influence of Jane Austen’s fiction.

In the fourth chapter, Wells studies literary tourism and books that have been inspired by these travels, considering the Jane Austen House Museum in Chawton and the Jane Austen Centre in Bath, with short side trips to Jane Austen’s grave at Winchester Cathedral and the site of her childhood home at Steventon. Rather than

merely providing a travelogue of Austen-related sites, Wells analyzes the way those sites provide satisfactory or unsatisfactory moments for the literary traveler. Utilizing personal interviews of visitors, log books from the two Austen museums, and several Austen tour books, Wells concludes that the visitors' "experience was affected not only by what they saw but also by what they imagined or felt while present" (129). Studying and listening to literary tourists can show us "the variety of ways in which they encounter, and respond to, Austen places" (132).

In the subsequent chapter, Wells considers various portraits of Jane Austen, beginning with the only known authentic drawing by Cassandra Austen. She explores the various reinventions of this portrait, noting how each age seems to appropriate the Jane that best reflects the audience: "popular depictions of Austen confirm readers' tendency to project onto her their own hopes and beliefs, however anachronistically" (169). This mythmaking, Wells explains, began with Henry Austen's "biographical notice" included with the posthumous publication of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* and culminates in the recent bio-pics *Becoming Jane* (2007) and *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008), along with other fictional representations of Austen's life.

As Wells moves farther from the actual life and works of Jane Austen, she considers the inspired-by "hybrid" genres, roughly categorized as sex, horror/paranormal, and faith-based, explaining that "these works do not qualify as fan fiction in the conventional sense, since they are not written to please other fans—and, indeed, may repel some who consider themselves devotees of Austen's writings" (178). The "lost sex scenes" that have been imagined in various Austen-inspired novels "can... best be understood as fan fiction that builds on, and literalizes, the 'sexual energy' that screenwriter Andrew Davies sought to convey" in the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* miniseries (184). For readers of the horror/paranormal Austen-inspired fiction, the appeal "rests in large part... on the shocking juxtaposition of Austen's supposedly well-mannered characters with scenes of gruesome carnage...and threatening monsters" (187-88). The readers of the faith-based Austen fiction "cherish the image of a Jane who, as depicted by her brother Henry...was 'thoroughly religious and devout,' as they aspire to be themselves" (191). As with the Austen travelers and the various Austen portraits, the hybrid fictions reflect the readers' hopes and expectations.

In the final chapter, Wells chronicles the history of the various Jane Austen Societies, focusing on JASNA (Jane Austen Society of North America), which was founded in 1979 and expanded exponentially following the 1995 film explosion. She explains the difficulty of bridging the vast interests of everyday readers and devotees with academic scholars. Ultimately, Wells explains, JASNA provides "accessible guides to Austen's writings and world, as well as online blogs by and forums for Austen fans, [which] allow every reader, if she or he chooses, to attain new insight into Austen and join—virtually, at least—the company of fellow aficionados" (219).

Throughout this book, Juliette Wells is painstaking in her scholarship, making sure to ground each of her analyses of popular trends in established academic theories, even while explaining the value of not disparaging the nonacademic nature of these various genres and audiences. Because of this precarious position, and the nontraditional focus of the book, the repetition of purpose and theoretical framework becomes redundant and perhaps overwrought at times. Just as JASNA sometimes finds it difficult to balance the desires of its disparate audience, Wells's readership may find the theoretical framework tedious or the apologetic nature of her embrace of the everyday or amateur reader patronizing. Considering what she has discovered, however, about the far-ranging and overlapping nature of the Austen scholar, fan, and reader, she has captured the zeitgeist of the twenty-first-century Jane Austen.