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Jane Austen: A Life by David Nokes

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Torgovnick herself admits that her representation of Fossey is flawed by a psychological bias and dubious sources, and so it is. But her reading of the anthropologist is still compelling, if for no other reason than it elicits controversy.

In her explanation of the primitive, Torgovnick explores places that have been generally associated with it—Africa, Asia, the South Pacific, the American Southwest—and moves us right into the '90s to examine the way in which the accouterments of modern society have diminished it. She contends that the men's mythopoetic movement, New Agers, and genital piercing all contain within them the desire to recapture the primitive, denied us by Western society. The chapter on genital piercing is perhaps the most provocative, as Torgovnick produces a blow-by-blow account of the self-inflicted, video-recorded penile piercing performance artist Monte Cazazza. Her chapter on New Agers, however, seems somehow insubstantial, but perhaps that is the very essence of New Ageism itself. On the other hand, her reading of movies such as *Dances with Wolves* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, which exemplify the manner in which the primitive has seeped into popular culture, is evenly balanced and generously non-dismissive of our cultural longings, however foolishly they are sometimes played out. Indeed, Torgovnick never denounces our quest to rediscover the primitive, although she does argue, rightly so, that the Western appropriation of Native American traditions, which has arisen because of our desire to recapture the ecstatic, misrepresents these multitudinous cultures and does nothing to help us better understand them.

What makes *Primitive Passions* so absorbing is that it can be easily enjoyed outside the academy. If nothing more, it's a great conversation starter. That waiter returned later to ask more about the book and show me a magic trick done with a quarter. Amusing. But I didn't invite him to my table. Marianna Torgovnick, on the other hand, I'd love to lunch with. An appetizer of female orgasm and the primitive over soup and coffee. Now, there's something I'd like to give myself up to.

Lezlie Hall

Jane Austen: A Life. By David Nokes. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997. 578 pages. \$35.00.

For contemporary biographers, Jane Austen presents a considerable challenge. Personal papers and letters illuminate portions of her life, but her successful efforts to efface evidence from some of the more eventful (and no doubt intriguing) years in her life results in gaping voids—holes which biographers have traditionally filled by relying on Austen's revisionary familial biographers, who created the mythical 'Aunt Jane' persona. In the new *Jane Austen: A Life*, David Nokes clearly follows the lead of Austen scholar Deborah Kaplan

(*Jane Austen Among Women*, 1992) in his effort to dismantle this unfounded image of Austen as matronly and consummately proper. Nevertheless, he resists Kaplan's often single-minded search for subversiveness as well as biographer John Halperin's (*The Life of Jane Austen*, 1984) tendency to recast and paraphrase letters in order to support his vision of Austen as emotionally confused, even weak. Instead, Nokes scrupulously returns to and reevaluates Austen's letters, and those of men and women even remotely associated with her, in order to narrate her life 'as it was experienced *at the time*, not with the detached knowingness of hindsight' (emphasis his, 5). Thus, he intended to write a biography without a preconceived idea of how the subject would ultimately be perceived. This notion of 'a biography written *forwards*' (emphasis his, 5) simultaneously leads to the strengths and weaknesses of Nokes' book.

Stylistically, the forward-moving construction functions beautifully. Nokes creates a series of snapshot-like scenes, ranging from colonial India, where Austen's uncle worked, to the various parishes of rural England. Preceded by datelines or descriptive phrases, many of these scenes take on the quality of well-written fiction rather than carefully researched and documented history. They allow for intense scrutiny of the moments of Austen's life about which reliable information remains. For Nokes, who is admirably committed to avoiding speculation, this format also facilitates the occasionally necessary elision of time periods of which nothing remains but falsehood. While frustrating to the curious reader, these skips in time reflect Nokes' sense of scholarly responsibility—he would rather leave gaps than do as his predecessors have done and cite legend as fact. He freely admits that, in situations such as Harris Bigg-Wither's marriage proposal and Austen's response, 'all we have are legends, anecdotes, and rumours...[H]ints and whispers, so often reproduced as facts, are little more than conjectures' (248).

Nokes' analyses of the major works is smoothly incorporated and consistently astute; the evolution of *Sense and Sensibility* is particularly insightful. In addition, his distinctive style provides an excellent showcase for Nokes' unimpeachable and meticulous research. His dedication to the chronological structure contributes to another notable strength: with only a handful of exceptions, Nokes resists the temptation to identify real people in Austen's life with the characters in her subsequent novels. This alone separates him from the majority of his predecessors and assures the value of this biography's contribution to the field of Austen scholarship. On a broader level, Nokes' methodology reveals a marked departure from standard literary biographical practice. As such, it merits praise for its originality and ambition.

However, significant problems emerge. Most damaging is the simple fact that readers *will* inevitably and unflinchingly view Jane Austen with the 'knowingness of hindsight.' Scholars read and write biographies of her because she is the author of masterpieces, a fact which is inseparably associated with her name. As such, the attempt to write a forward-moving biography without the specific, preconceived aim of situating and understanding her acts of literary creation seems theoretically untenable. This flawed perspective re-

sults in what appears to be a complete unwillingness to exclude any documented information, regardless of what it may be. Is it relevant to Austen scholars that her sister Cassandra recommended rhubarb to her brother Henry when his stomach ached (421)? Nokes appears to include every documented anecdote he finds as part of his plan to illuminate Austen's life as thoroughly as possible—but one must admit that even in the most historically significant of lives, some unimportant events will occur. The endless listing of such details only dulls the reader's senses to the point of rendering her scarcely able to cull the relevant from the superfluous.

Yet upon completion of Nokes' book, even the most eager of Austen scholars will surely feel satiated. In spite of its notable faults, *Jane Austen: A Life* demonstrates a remarkable amount of thoroughness, caution, and responsibility, qualities which will surely establish Nokes among the most definitive of Austen biographers.

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