

Small Things and New Insights

The Real Jane Austen: A Life in Small Things

By Paula Byrne.

New York: Harper Collins, 2013. Xii + 381 pages.

B/W and color illustrations throughout.

Review by Devoney Looser.

The title of Paula Byrne's book *The Real Jane Austen* is a tease. Of course, Byrne doesn't give us "the real" Austen, as if that were possible. A dearth of cold, hard facts about Austen's life means most biographers traffic in speculation, inference, and wishful thinking. The importance of this book is not in its greater authenticity but in its unusual structure, superb anecdotes, and cleverly connecting previously unconnected dots. *The Real Jane Austen* is a refreshing, groundbreaking, and astoundingly original book.

Byrne's book uses the word "real" in the sense of "material"—the "small things" of the subtitle. Some of them are not so small, such as carriage-sized bathing machines; some are people, not things. But Byrne's impressive contextualization of the minutiae of Austen's life and times—of the materiality of her world—offers a bird's eye view into previously overlooked items and their connections to Austen's fiction. Each of Byrne's eighteen chapters is named for an object or a person, and each is skillfully introduced and described among Austen's milieu. The book is not a birth-to-death march through Austen's life. It is like a delightful rummage through a Regency chest of drawers.

As a reading experience, *The Real Jane Austen* is entertaining, pleasing, and provoking. The chapters on the East Indian Shawl and the topaz crosses, speculating on the Austen family's Asian connections and involvement in the opium trade, are brilliant. The chapter on the subscription list to Frances Burney's *Camilla* offers a compelling reading of Austen's close connections to the

Burney circle, as well as why it mattered that several of Austen's distant female relatives were authors. "The Daughter of Mansfield" chapter considers Lord Mansfield's adopted black daughter, Dido Belle, "the most celebrated mixed-race woman in England," arguing for her as the inspiration for *Sanditon's* Miss Lambe. Byrne's investigating red velvet chapel cushions and Stoneleigh Abbey will have you seeing *Mansfield Park* in new ways. Also splendid is the chapter on Austen's writing desk, although Byrne preciously re-christens it a "laptop."

There are, however, more irksome things than declaring a writing desk the precursor of a computer. More than a handful of far-fetched readings of the novels are stretched to suit Byrne's sense of Austen's process and motivations. I was particularly frustrated when these readings moved sneakily from speculation into assertion. Austen's cousin Eliza de Feuillide goes from "perhaps" inspiring aspects of *Persuasion's* two Elizas to keeping the entirety of the French Revolution out of Austen's oeuvre. Byrne concludes, "Loving Eliza as [Austen] did, it would have been too painful to let her pen dwell on the guilt and misery of revolutionary Paris." Occasionally, the book engages in sentimental psychologizing on partial information, as when Jane Austen is likened to Catherine Morland, and Byrne points out that "There was indeed a green slope at the back of Steventon rectory, perfect for rolling."

Also provoking—in positive and negative senses—was the portrait that emerged of Austen. I don't mean the supposed new portrait of Austen that Byrne now owns—which I encourage you to read about elsewhere than in Byrne's own book—but the book's overall sense of Austen as a person. It is a picture revealed on the book flap, which asks, "Who was the real Jane Austen? A retired spinster who confined her novels to the small canvas of village life? Or a strong-minded woman who took the bold decision to remain unmarried and

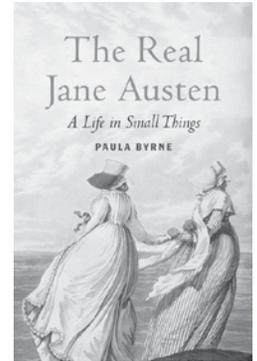
fashion herself as a professional writer?"

Naturally, we know the answer is not option A. But must we therefore accept every word of option B?

Byrne's biography emphasizes, following Jan Fergus, Austen's professionalism as a writer. As Byrne writes, "Jane Austen was a worker." This is well and good as a corrective to past myths, although just one part of a multifaceted life.

The other aspect Byrne emphasizes is Austen's personal attractiveness and "eloquence and wit" with men. If Byrne is to be believed, Austen charmed a suitor in every drawing room. Ironic asides in Austen's letters are taken for men's serious if unspoken declarations of love. Every romantic rumor or innuendo is spun out. Byrne goes to great pains to characterize Austen as desirable and sought-after by men.

Has it really come to this? It's time to ask whether newfangled stories of the irresistible Austen who actively refused marriage in order to choose a passionate life of writing are any more "real" than the tired old accounts of the undesirable spinster who made fiction her compensatory passionate destiny after a lack of—pace Harris Bigg-Wither—romantic opportunities. Patterns of imagining Austen's personal charms (or lack of them) are indeed "small things." But as *The Real Jane Austen* ably proves, small things may add up to stunning new insights. At its best, that is what Byrne's tour de force book has the power to do.



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