

Cozying up to Jane Austen

On the Sofa with Jane Austen

By Maggie Lane.

The Crowood Press, 2016. 141 pages.

21 B/W illustrations. Hardcover. \$26.95.

Review by Charlotte Goddu.

Reading Maggie Lane's *On the Sofa with Jane Austen*, I wondered how the essays the book includes existed on their own out in the world before ending up in this book, so well do they complement each other. *On the Sofa with Jane Austen* collects essays Lane has written for *Regency World* magazine over the years. Most of the essays (with a few notable exceptions, like the last essay, "Dear Mary," to which I'll return later) center on a detail Lane observes across Austen's works. The title essay, for example, tracks the role of the sofa as a site of intimacy, illness, or leisure in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Sanditon*, and *Persuasion*.

Perhaps my indexical description of this essay has been influenced by its form; "On the Sofa," like most of the essays Lane has collected in this book, is full of catalogues and lists of moments from Austen's novels and moments from Austen's own life. It is easy to see, reading just one of the essays, Lane's encyclopedic knowledge of Austen's oeuvre. After an entire book of them, Lane has eliminated any doubt that there exists a single fact in

all of Austen's books she hasn't seen and noted down for future writings. In each slight essay—few run more than five pages—Lane pulls examples from nearly every novel.

This approach is both exhaustive and, at times, exhausting, not because of the essays' many examples but because of their unvaried composition. Collected together in one book, the essays reveal their shared pattern: Lane begins by stating a trend she's observed in Austen's work; she lists key occurrences of that trend across the novels; she restates the trend, coupled with an historical or personal observation about Austen herself that illuminates her impulse to write what she does.

This uniform approach—especially Lane's closing life-of-Austen volta—can be arresting and even poignant. "Reading Aloud," Lane's essay on the role of reading and spoken literature in Austen's novels, marries textual observations and facts about Austen's life perfectly. The essay begins with Austen's own reading; Lane discusses Austen's sharing her work by reading it aloud before publication.

But it also begins with a clear indication of Lane's own immersive understanding of Austen's work. She writes, "Oh for a recording of Jane reading *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma*!" This exclamation of personal desire seated in a deep, scholarly relationship with Austen's writing sums up Lane's tone across her essays. She loves Austen the way a teenage girl loves her favorite pop star—this is not to say frivolously, but instead with a devotion that is at once obsessive and giddy, depth-plumbing and heart-pounding.

Lane weaves, throughout the essay, reasons reading aloud is so important for Austen's characters and for women of Austen's time generally; Lane points out that "Reading aloud has the great advantage that everybody in the room is being amused, instructed or entertained simultaneously... everybody can contribute to a discussion arising from

the book." Tracking the role of reading through Austen's novels seems to be a way for her better to understand Austen, rather than the books, though; her final point is that Austen's attention to reading aloud comes from the fact that she herself was a good oral reader.

In fact, Lane's entire collection sees Austen's works as the key to Austen's self. Lane tends to make few analytical points about the novels themselves. Rarely does she deploy her observation of patterns in order to make claims about what the novels attempt to say; instead, she bends her catalogue of trends toward an understanding of Austen's real life. *On the Sofa with Jane Austen* is most interesting for Lane's impulse to circle what she wants, which is, of course, an impossible thing: to just sit on the sofa with Austen and chat about life.

This makes the last essay in the collection, "Dear Mary," all the more striking. It is an epistolary essay addressed to Mary Crawford wherein Lane sympathizes with Mary and bemoans her unfair treatment in *Mansfield Park*. Although the letter is not addressed to Austen, its form makes it the most genuine-feeling piece in the collection. Finally Lane has laid aside the distance of normal essay writing and gotten to what she really wants to do: enter into the books as though they are real life. I wished, reading it, that the entire collection had been a series of letters to Austen. That way, Lane could have asked the question that shines through her essays like a flashlight under the blanket of a sleepless, reading child—who are you, Jane?

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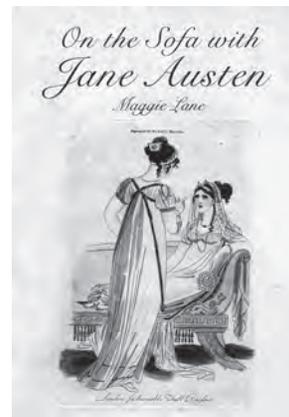


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