

A Passionate Tribute to Austen

Jane Austen out of the blue

By Donald Measham.

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Reviewed by Karen Joy Fowler.

One day Donald Measham's aptly titled *Jane Austen out of the blue* appeared in my mailbox. In spite of the encouraging quote from Sir Angus Wilson on the cover, I'll confess to picking it up with no high hopes. A paragraph later I was in love.

Austen enthusiasts know that she sometimes continued to imagine her characters' lives in the afterwords of her books. We know that Kitty and Mary Bennet both married eventually; we know that Mr. Woodhouse survived Emma's marriage by only a couple of years. In Measham's book, Austen has continued to author all her characters in like manner. But in 1817, as she lies dying, this authorship comes to a stop, her characters left suddenly on their own to muddle through as best they can. What they will need, sadly, is a new writer.

This is the situation in which they find themselves: Elizabeth is pregnant; Darcy is in Italy ostensibly looking into productive, but esthetic, improvements for the grounds at Pemberley though there are hints that Elizabeth's inability to deliver a male heir has put a strain on his spirits and their marriage. Through her sister Jane, Elizabeth is introduced to a new friend, the erudite and admirable widow Fanny Bertram, while *Sanditon's* Charlotte Heyward has recently made the acquaintance of Captain and Anne Wentworth and their charming daughter Agnes.

Mr. Woodhouse is being coaxed (with great difficulty, of course) from his home by his daughters, Emma and Isabella, to try a new and remarkable health regime. Mr. Woodhouse has become more querulous and more cunning over the years and is now a trial to his patient, generous son-in-law.

Elinor and Marianne, like Fanny, are widowed. They have a child apiece and now live together on Colonel Brandon's estate where Robert Ferrars has proved to be a surprisingly good and involved uncle.

Austen herself has been writing *Sanditon*. Measham notes that she is suffering from Addison's disease – low blood pressure and the secretion of salt. "This loss of salt," he says, "has drawn her to write about the sea. A seaside place called Sanditon – the setting of her final work. She writes about brine: writes about it in an unfriendly way. Writes of taking the waters: of drinking salt water, bathing in it. She is skeptical of what some part of her mind guesses her body may need."

When Austen sets aside her unfinished novel for the last time, all of the characters listed above, each for her own good reason, suddenly find occasion to head toward the seaside resort of Sanditon.

Measham's book is obviously a labor of love. His expertise is evident and a quick Google of his other books proves this out – he has written scholarly works on Ruskin, Lawrence, and twentieth century poetry. *Jane Austen out of the blue* relies often on familiar Austenian techniques – the use of letters at critical junctures, the formal, rhythmic prose, the pitch-perfect wit. For the Austen fan, there is the steady delight of reuniting with so many beloved characters. Here and there we find a character improved or worsened since our last encounter, but all are recognizable and all are drawn with intelligence and care.

a metafictional act of risky derring-do



And then there is the equal pleasure in seeing the unfinished *Sanditon* plot picked up and continued to its resolution. Other writers before Measham have written their own ends to *Sanditon*; no doubt writers will continue to do so. But Measham's version, incorporating as it does not only so many of Austen's other characters, but also Austen's own death, gives *Jane Austen out of the blue* a depth of feeling and power beyond the usual.

This is a smart, meticulously imagined book. As Austen's grip loosens, Measham slowly begins to employ un-Austen-like devices as well—a missing will, a hidden cabinet, a poetic, cryptic scene of sensuality, a growing sense of menace, a morbid focus on mortality. In other words, things take a distinctly Radcliffe-ish turn. This forces Austen to rouse herself for some final complaints and instructions as she passes the lives of her characters into the hands of a character she has created herself for this purpose. *Jane Austen out of the blue* finishes with this metafictional act of risky derring-do, a high-wire act Measham pulls off without a bobble.

Although Measham is wonderfully deft at Austenian pastiche, the passages of the book in his own voice are also beautiful – precise, poetic, and very moving. While I loved everything about this passionate tribute to Austen and recommend it whole-heartedly, I hope he found this foray into fiction sufficiently rewarding to do it again. Whatever the topic of the next, I can promise to be an early and eager reader.