

“Quite in a Fuss about the Child”

Jane Austen and Children

By David Selwyn.
Continuum, 2010. 249 pages.
16 B/W illustrations. Hardcover. \$34.95.

Review by Kelly M. McDonald.

Despite a rocky start, David Selwyn's *Jane Austen and Children* eventually delivers fitting analyses of his topic. A less-than-profitable use of historical examples (which sometimes fail to be properly footnoted) hinders the flow of early chapters; this lack of finesse could have been smoothed out by more attentive editing (he acknowledges three editors). The subject matter is best served by Selwyn's ability to dissect small scenes in Austen works and revelatory passages from letters and the few diaries and memoirs relatives kept or produced.

Employing a format similar to *Jane Austen and Marriage* by Hazel Jones (also published by Continuum), Selwyn leads readers through life's stages, until the metaphorical children born at the beginning are marrying and having offspring of their own. Children extracted from the novels range from the unseen (the numerous younger Musgroves) to heroes and heroines themselves. This design uncovers telling vignettes. For instance, while Anne Elliot's invalid nephew Charles provides her a reason for staying out of Captain Wentworth's company, Charles's brother Walter becomes “an unconscious means of bringing them into intimate contact” in what Selwyn terms “one of the most

vividly imagined scenes” of *Persuasion*. Walter has climbed upon Anne's back and will not get down: “Suddenly . . . we feel what happens next, as Anne feels it . . . There is an extraordinary delicacy here. Wentworth's action is manly both in the ‘resolute’ way in which it is performed and in the chaste distancing effected by the mediating of his contact with her neck through the ‘sturdy little hands’ of the child; and this is reflected in the narrative itself, since the reader does not know who had performed the action until Anne herself knows.”

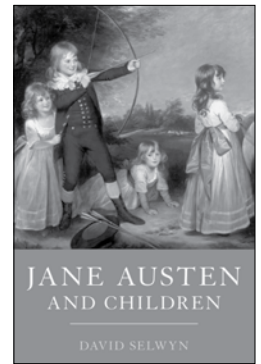
A discussion of children naturally involves relatives. “In Jane Austen's novels the parents best suited to bringing up children are dead.” This rousing line of argument contrasts the likes of Henry Dashwood (who lived “economically”), Mrs. Woodhouse (“the only person able to cope with” Emma), Mrs. Tilney (Eleanor's “constant friend”) with those parents astutely categorized as the Foolish, the Ill-Judging, the Weak, the Over-Indulgent, those Incapacitated by Circumstances, and the Downright Poisonous. “They do not on the whole add up to an encouraging picture of parenthood. . . . [Austen] found that bad parents made for richer drama and better comedy.”

“[C]ousins are seen as something of a necessary evil. When Mrs. Jennings meets the Steele sisters and discovers they are relations of hers, she tries to reassure her daughter as to their acceptability as guests . . . : ‘Lady Middleton was thrown into no little alarm . . . by hearing that she was very soon to receive a visit from two girls whom she had never seen in her life. . . . Their being her relations too made it so much the worse. . . .’” Selwyn does well to point out that the “various relationships within the family are on the whole more important to Jane Austen's characters than friendships outside it.” Charlotte Lucas, Harriet Smith, and Miss Hamilton/Mrs. Smith are exceptions.

The chapter “Reading and Writing” introduces a “battered and much used copy of *The History of Little Goody*

Two-Shoes” — “In the top left corner, above the [frontispiece] picture, it bears the name of Jane Austen.” This foray into history, including early proponents of children's books, is well-presented, if somewhat lengthy. The “Education” chapter is more germane, dealing with boys and girls going to school, including Jane and Cassandra's own stay at Mrs. La Tournelle's.

“‘One does not care for girls till they are grownup,’ remarked Jane Austen.” Selwyn utilizes this statement persuasively, not only for his chapter “Maturity,” but perhaps as a catalyst for this book. While Austen's main characters may be grown, their own formative years, as well as their peripheral families, necessarily receive scrutiny. With a discussion of societal debuts and attracting mates, *Jane Austen and Children* heads towards its conclusion with a look at parent-child relationships. Sir Thomas Bertram's questioning of Maria's feelings for Mr. Rushworth merely makes the girl more determined to marry, although she already intuits the unsuitability of the match. This is contrasted with his questioning Fanny about Mr. Crawford. Austen's November 1814 advice to niece Fanny Knight about the suit of Mr. Plumptre can then be seen as sage advice for Maria Bertram: “‘It is very true that you may never attach another Man, his equal altogether, but if that other Man has the power of attaching you more, he will be in your eyes the most perfect.’” Thank David Selwyn for pointing out such parallels of fiction and life.



Kelly M. McDonald's breakout session at the 2011 AGM in Fort Worth is “A House Divided? How the ‘Sister Arts’ Define the Dashwood Sisters.” Her publications appear in JASNA News, Persuasions/Persuasions On-line and Jane Austen's Regency World magazine.

