



Jane Austen, detective

Jane and the Twelve Days of Christmas.

By Stephanie Barron.

Soho Press, 2014. 336 pages.

Hardback \$19.00.

Review by Sheryl Craig.

If you enjoy a good English country house murder mystery, especially one that takes place over the holidays, you are sure to derive great pleasure from Stephanie Barron's *Jane and the Twelve Days of Christmas*. The plot is sufficiently convoluted to keep the reader guessing until the end when all is revealed. In many ways, the mystery is typical of the genre, with a snowbound house party and a collection of suspicious houseguests, but with the added bonus of Jane Austen as the narrator and sleuth.

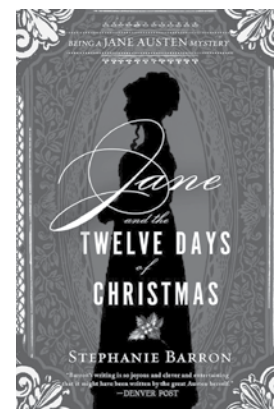
It is, no doubt, impossible for anyone now living to accurately imagine what daily life was like in 1814, but Barron's attention to historical detail is impressive, and she probably comes as close as anyone can reasonably expect. From the first chapter, Barron drops the reader into a wintry world without the comforts of central heating and electric blankets, when people expected to spend

at least part of each day shivering in the cold. With no snowplows to clear the roads, the houseguests are believably trapped, and, without modern forensic science, fingerprints go undetected, and a crime scene melts away with the snow.

Barron's gift for language is a thing of beauty, and her ability to recreate the cadence of Jane Austen's writing is a treat. Familiarity with Austen's novels and letters will add to the reader's enjoyment, as the book contains many lines gleaned from Austen's writing. However, Barron's research into Jane Austen's life poses a difficulty. When Barron uses real members of the Austen family as characters in her novel, she must create fictional beings and write dialogue for them. No doubt, descendants of the Austen family may not care to see their ancestors depicted in this way, and the reader is cautioned to remember that these characters are creations of Barron's fertile imagination, not actual members of the Austen family.

If Barron's Mary Austen, Jane Austen's sister-in-law, is not *Persuasion's* Mary Musgrove, then she is someone very much like her, and Jane's brother James turns out to be a miserly bore, similar to Emma Watson's brother in *The Watsons*. Jane's mother is not *Pride and Prejudice's* Mrs. Bennet, but Mrs. Austen is a bit silly. There is no reason to assume that Jane

Austen's art so closely reflected her life. Nevertheless, all of these characters add comic relief, and they are familiarly quirky and amusing. And if the narrator is not Jane



Austen, she is nonetheless a clever, witty, and entertaining detective. Cassandra is a bit of a non-entity, and Jane's failure to confide in her sister is perhaps the least believable aspect of the story. However, if your willing suspension of disbelief is in good, working order, then this is a book for you.

Stephanie Barron is the penname of Francine Matthews of Colorado, and this is the twelfth book in her Jane Austen mystery series, beginning with *Jane and the Unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor* and picking up where book number eleven, *Jane and the Canterbury Tale*, left off. When *Jane and the Twelve Days of Christmas* ends, Jane Austen is writing *Emma*, so there is every reason to believe that Jane's career as a detective is, by no means, over.



On display at the Jane Austen House Museum table in the AGM emporium was a reproduction of Jane's dress and bonnet (near left). The project was funded by Sue Forgue of Chicago. In costume at the AGM were Baronda Bradley (middle left) dressed as a maid, Patrick Stokes (middle right) in a replica of Charles Austen's uniform, and Life Member Elizabeth Graham-Smith (far right) in a ball gown.

