

A Gothic Genius

A Man of Genius

By Janet Todd.

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Review by Diana Birchall.

This novel is not about Jane Austen or her writing, nor does she put in an appearance. Yet it could hardly have been written without her, for its author, Janet Todd, is one of the great Jane Austen scholars, who has mentally worked and lived in the long eighteenth century as nearly as might be imagined in the long twentieth. One could list her academic credentials, and they are impressive: editor of the Cambridge edition of Austen's works, she has written widely on early women authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft and has had a long academic career, culminating as President of Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge.

Yet, as Jane Austen herself very well knew, even the finest academic credentials are not necessarily related to the ability to write a compelling novel. Many a novel has been attempted by a learned professor who gets lost in labyrinthine research details and forgets to tell a story. As Austen wrote:

“And while the abilities of the nine-hundredth abridger of the *History of England*, or of the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior, with a paper from *The Spectator*, and a chapter from Sterne, are eulogized by a thousand pens—there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them.”

With this in mind, one may approach an academic's debut novel with some caution. Happily, caution may here be swiftly abandoned to the winds, for Todd is a natural storyteller whose great learning has only enriched and enhanced

her tale to an exciting and extraordinary degree.

It is 1816, and Ann St. Clair, an intelligent woman no longer young, earns her living as a professional author, writing potboilers of the Gothic variety so dear to the heart of *Northanger Abbey's* own heroine, Catherine Moreland. In Ann's purple tales, as in those of her namesake Ann Radcliffe, ghastly things happen to young women in romantic locations. Ann herself has had an unhappy youth: rejected by her narcissistic mother, Caroline, she knows nothing of her father but her mother's vague and glamorizing recollections. As a writer, Ann lives on the fringes of the masculine London literary world. Here she meets Robert James, a self-styled charismatic “genius” whom all admire, though he has actually produced little. While in thrall to him, she gradually finds that he is a hollow figure whose egotism and self-hatred lead him into madness and violence. Desperately she accompanies him in travels across a Continent recently ravaged by the Napoleonic wars, to a damp and decadent occupied Venice. Here is the very eye of Gothic mood and mystery, a city that Todd knows intimately and paints with captivating vividness.

The European settings and details of early nineteenth-century daily life are so realistic that it feels as if we have just missed Byron's passage through Venice by a few hours. The fast-moving, picaresque travels seem out of an unknown novel by Ann Radcliffe, and visions of Venice, with its decayed palazzos holding secrets, are gorgeous to revel in. The novel's mystery elements keep the reader on edge, as Ann, in ever-tightening, alarmingly Gothic situations, must delve into her own past and her fraught and dangerous present.

Despite its homage to the Gothic, the most terrifying aspect of the story is the central relationship, whose bruising dysfunction may be as common in modern times as in any past century. Ann has fallen for a madman, a brute, yet her own

feelings of responsibility and neediness keep her from pulling away. The psychological portrayal of this d a m a g i n g relationship is the novel's most dazzling and accom-

plished centerpiece. This may make it dark and unsettling reading for some, but the many glittering textures and unfolding surprises are rich reward. The arch, precious London literati, the political gossip swirling around the Prince Regent and his rejected wife, Princess Caroline, the raffish lives of expatriates and nobles in Venice, are deftly, authoritatively wrought.

Sensible, down-to-earth Ann is the antithesis of a Gothic romantic heroine, troubled by real and false memory in her past, and the warring love and loathing in her emotional addiction to a monstrous “man of genius.” This is a haunting evocation of a world Jane Austen also inhabited, an atmosphere she herself obviously relished in her reading. Her country gentry sphere differed from that of independent working woman Ann, but their co-existence is palpable. We can imagine that while Austen was collecting reviews of *Emma* and writing business letters to John Murray, that publisher was also corresponding with Byron, who was then in Venice—where the agonizing story of Ann and Robert was transpiring (or was it?) near the next canal...

Diana Birchall recently retired as a story analyst at Warner Bros, and is author of many “Austen-esque” stories, plays, and novels, in addition to a scholarly biography of her novelist grandmother. In retirement she is blogging at Austen Variations, Vulpes Libris, and her own Light, Bright and Sparkling.

