

Fans, Fanatics & Fantasists

Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures

By Claudia Johnson.

The University of Chicago Press, 2012.

x + 224 pages. Hardcover: \$35.00. Kindle: \$8.55

Everybody's Jane: Austen in the Popular Imagination

By Juliette Wells.

Continuum Books, 2012.

x + 246 pages. Paperback: \$29.95. Kindle: \$18.29

Review by Elsa A. Solender.

Two new studies of Jane Austen's fans by professors of English are sufficiently different to reward all readers interested in the Jane Austen "brand," a term covering her literary reputation, "marketability," and variations on the phenomenon known variably as "Jane Mania," "Austenmania," or "Jane-o-mania."

Juliette Wells surveys a breathtaking number of pop culture manifestations of Jane Mania utilizing sociological and statistical as well as literary methodology. She suggests that non-academicians skip an introductory chapter justifying her approach to professorial colleagues.

Wells offers as comprehensive an account as we are likely to have until the next edition of her book, probably already justified by a mind-boggling current increase in Internet fan activity alone.

Of special interest to JASNA members will be two chapters which venture beyond Wells's thorough-going accounts of such matters as sequels, prequels, literary tourism, portraits, fan fiction, films, horror, the paranormal, the pornographic, and some unclassifiable hybrids: one devoted to the founding of both the British Jane Austen Society and JASNA—"Coming Together Through Austen"—and another profiling the fascinating, but very private Alberta H. Burke, wife of JASNA co-founder Henry G. Burke, the ultimate "Austen Omnivore." Mrs. Burke (1907–1975) amassed the most extensive collection of Austen books, manuscripts, secondary source materials, and ephemera outside Britain. Her will divided her treasures between the J. P. Morgan Library and

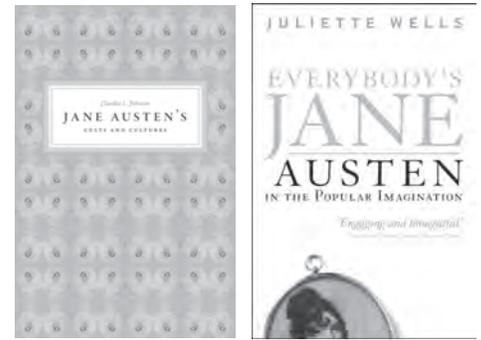
Museum in New York (manuscripts and letters) and her alma mater, Goucher College in Baltimore (first editions of the novels and everything else).

"I am always enchanted by any little scrap of knowledge which has anything to do with Jane Austen," the collector wrote in a 1941 letter. One cannot help wondering what Mrs. Burke—a sophisticated reader and critic who was acquainted with many of the leading Austen scholars of her day, but who also saved everything from scholarly tracts to crossword clues and cartoons containing Austen references—would make of some twenty-first century Jane "maniacs," passionate, self-proclaimed Austen enthusiasts who own "Jane Austen" tea towels, key rings, earrings, chocolates, comic books, dolls, and coffee mugs, but have never read a word of her novels.

We anticipate more insights into "everything Austen" from Dr. Wells, now based at Goucher College.

One should read Claudia Johnson's book more as a meditation, an analytical treatment of the same phenomenon, Jane Mania, placed in philosophical and historical contexts—with special attention to issues that have long engaged the Murray Professor of English Literature at Princeton. Her ardent advocacy of a portrait of a young woman presented by the Rice branch of the Austen family as a depiction of the young Jane Austen is better understood within her argument describing the yearning among ardent enthusiasts—including herself—for a more definitive image of the elusive novelist than the unsatisfying water color sketch by her sister, Cassandra, which resides under glass and a protective cover in the National Portrait Gallery in London.

Consideration of such matters as Jane Austen's Body, Jane Austen's Magic, Jane Austen's World War I, Jane Austen's World War II, Jane Austen's House—and, finally, Jane Austen's Ubiquity—offers valuable insights to enrich readings and re-readings, at the Johnson-endorsed slow, reflective pace, of the most



important component of Jane Austen's legacy: her words, which Johnson aptly calls "the real thing." Both Wells and Johnson provide interesting, sometimes rare illustrations to supplement their findings.

Professor Johnson is, of course, a top-tier intellect who writes with erudition and elegance. On this occasion, she expresses a not-unwelcome element of self-deprecation even as she reflects upon a certain discomfort, if not disdain, among some academicians for "unprofessional" or unserious behavior among JASNA revelers: "...if JASNA's passion for costume balls seems trivial in the eyes of the non-elect, what could seem more so than my labors over comma placement ...?" Elsewhere, she also acknowledges her gratitude to JASNA—especially the Philadelphia and Chicago chapters—for their Austen "companionship." Interestingly, as Wells's book reveals, it was a wish for just this sort of "democratic" ingathering of both academic and "civilian" Austen enthusiasts that motivated JASNA's founders.

Taken with Rachel Brownstein's recent *Why Jane Austen?*—a different approach to Jane Mania, demonstrating successful approaches to teaching Austen novels to younger readers (reviewed in *JASNA News*, Winter 2011)—we now have a formidable trio of books arguing for utilization of Jane Austen's popularity to elevate attention to and appreciation of her most valuable contribution: her novels.

Elsa Solender, a past president of JASNA, is author of the novel Jane Austen in Love: An Entertainment.