

IN THE AFTERGLOW of the phenomenon known as “Jane Fever,” all signs and portents point to a continuing reign by Jane Austen’s star in the literary firmament. Instead of the once-familiar query—“Who’s Jane Austen?”—knowledge of JASNA’s existence now often elicits sage nods of recognition. (*Advice*: Forget that the nods may only mean, “Oh, yes, I saw the movie!” Advise good-naturedly, “Try the books, they’re better!”)

If name recognition is any true measure, Jane Austen has captured a prominent place in popular consciousness. What’s more, she is lingering rather longer than others whose works were recently brought to the screen: How many T-shirts or bumper stickers have you seen declaring, “I’d Rather Be Reading Henry James.” Or Edith Wharton or Virginia Woolf?

I believe Jane Austen’s achievement will prove strong enough to survive even the trivialization that comes with fame nowadays. My favorite *New Yorker* magazine cartoon showed two sophisticates at a table with the caption, “Oh, *that* Jane. I thought you meant Jane Austen.” And our favorite novelist might have enjoyed having entire sections of video catalogues dedicated to filmed versions of her “children.” How, though, would she have replied to a reporter from a women’s magazine who called for tips on how to organize “a romantic, relaxing Jane Austen beauty weekend”?

Jane Austen is deservedly enjoying more than the scant fifteen minutes of fame allotted us all by Andy Warhol. For better or worse, interest in performing her fiction continues strong: three filmed versions of her works are in production in Britain as I write (“Mansfield Park,” “Northanger Abbey,” and “Sanditon”) and a new production of “Pride and Prejudice” will be mounted by Canada’s Stratford Festival this coming season.

The number of books spawned by her current burst of fame is somewhat daunting. I found none of last year’s spate of “new” biographies particularly enlightening, but they did stimulate some intriguing review articles. Lee Siegel, writing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, identified in Jane Austen’s “simultaneous tearing down of conventions and institutions and keeping them intact” some significant healing qualities. He believes them to be as relevant to our frenetic culture as to the shell-



Presidents
of JASNA



1979–81
J. DAVID (JACK) GREY
co-founder, New York, NY

1981–84
JOSEPH J. COSTA
Nanuet, NY

1984–88
LORRAINE HANAWAY
Wayne, PA

1988–92
EILEEN SUTHERLAND
Vancouver, BC

1992–96
GARNET BASS
Raleigh, NC

1996–
ELSA SOLENDER
New York, NY

shocked World War I veterans (like the ones in Kipling’s short story, “The Janeites”) who were advised to read her work for therapeutic purposes (“A Writer Who Is Good for You,” January 1998).

James Wood argued provocatively in *The New Republic* that Jane Austen, not James Joyce, was the earliest practitioner of stream-of-consciousness writing. He credits her with the first “discovery of how to represent the brokenness of the mind’s communication with itself” (“The Birth of Inwardness: The Heroic Consciousness of Jane Austen,” August 17 & 24, 1998).

Even passing references can add to Austen’s repute as the standard against which any novel of manners must be measured. Ruth R. Wisse, hailing Allegra Goodman’s *Kaaterskill Falls* as “the first American-Jewish novel of manners,” cited strong affinities with Austen to make her case: “If the laughing heroine of Jane Austen [Emma] has to be reined in by moral discipline, the overdisciplined heroine of Allegra Goodman has to be liberated by laughter.” Wisse appreciates how “the novelist of manners endows self-discipline itself with a freedom, a spiritual largeness it is not allowed to claim in its own name,” a sentiment to which I believe Jane Austen might say, Amen (“The Joy of Limits,” *Commentary*, December 1998).

The editors of *Persuasions* have asked in this issue what we read after reading all of Jane Austen. I suppose the true Janeite must first recommend reading Jane Austen again—and I do, for she never disappoints. When Irene Collins told us at the AGM in Quebec City that Mr. Collins’s living was secure—that he did not *have* to grovel before his noble patroness to retain his post—I could not resist a return to *Pride and Prejudice* to relish his consummate obsequiousness again. After Kenneth Graham, another AGM speaker, described General Tilney’s likely military experience, I had to return to *Northanger Abbey* to appraise his strategy in the courtship of Catherine Morland.

But I may also rely on my preoccupation with Jane Austen to discover other good writers. Ruth Wisse certainly convinced me to look into *Kaaterskill Falls*. And I recently savored the nineteenth Aubrey-Maturin adventure by Patrick O’Brian, who acknowledges Austen as his muse. Finally, after reading the late Robertson Davies’s last essays, I decided to forgive him his early dislike of Jane Austen: he owed rather more than he suspected to Austen’s prescription for a novel grounded in “three or four families in a country village.”

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