

Designed exclusively for bad readers.

Jane Austen, the Secret Radical

By Helena Kelly.

Alfred. A. Knopf, 2017. 336 pages.

9 B/W illustrations. Paperback. \$28.95.

Review by Janine Barchas.

Titles of books can be powerful lures. This book by Helena Kelly bears a marvelous title. It is disappointing that its tantalizing titular promise remains unfulfilled by its content.

But this book is not aimed at us, for it does not address informed members of a literary society such as JASNA—unless you, dear reader of this review, are guilty of substituting films for books and of mistaking the isolated quips on gift mugs or bank notes for the full compass of Austen’s literary genius. Such is the presumed audience of dull elves whom Kelly deigns to instruct after an initial chapter that thoroughly rights and chides “us” for gross misconceptions about the Georgian era as well as unhealthy obsessions with Colin Firth. Perhaps the pedagogy of the verbal slap is making a comeback (“blinds us,” “doesn’t hold water,” or “wrong”). At every supercilious turn towards a familiar fact about the dangers of childbirth, the anxieties of war, or the value of money in Austen’s time, I was reminded of Vizzini’s line from *The Princess Bride*: “Have you ever heard of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates? Morons.” But if you do not mind a good scolding and view Austen’s work exclusively as bodice-rippers (“She never expected to be read the way we read her, gulped down as escapist historical fiction, fodder for romantic fantasies”), well, you are indeed going to learn a lot from this book.

If, however, you sense that Austen’s novels are more than flat romance plots, or have attended any workshop or talk at an AGM, or read any annotated edition, article, biography, or indeed any piece of literary criticism since, let’s say, Marilyn Butler’s *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* in 1975, this tone-deaf book is not for

you. The author herself does not appear to give weight to commentators after 1890, although she often refers to generic “critics” and “readers” in the abstract, usually with dismissive asides about the inaccuracy of Austen films or souvenir tchotchkes. As a result, this is a stubborn DIY project of literary riffs, with smart, if commonplace, observations rendered as if extraordinary insights.

The radical nature of this book may be in its mashup of creative writing and close reading. Kelly is a talented raconteur and summarizer. Each chapter starts as a fictionalized biography of a scene in Austen’s life, then recounts a cartoonish misconception about Austen, only to debunk it with Truth sourced from closely reading her novels: “There is, of course, rather more to it than that.” Thomas Aquinas took a similar approach in his *Summa Theologica* when revising Western philosophy, so such aggressive modus operandi boasts an outstanding track record. Although an experienced beneficiary of a good Catholic school and admirer of the *Summa*, I found this book’s straw-men arguments infuriating—because so patronizing towards not just Jane Austen’s fans and scholars but her own well-deserved place in the literary canon.

Unrestrained by reception history, this book contains a few new turns. The author claims, for example, that “Colonel Brandon is very much in the frame as a potential father to the younger Eliza,” that Edward may have been sent to a private tutor at Plymouth because he was sickly and simple, that Mr. Knightley rules over his patch like a veritable Marie Antoinette, and that Jane Fairfax and Harriet Smith are, secretly, half sisters. These deductions will surely please the conspiracy theorists. Historians may also find the opening dismissal of a century of realist fictions by novelists such as Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Frances Burney refreshingly freeing: “Think, too,” cautions Kelly, “about the fact that Jane was the only novelist of this period to write novels that were set more or less in the present day and

more or less in the real world.” And there are several prurient close-ups that zoom in upon sexual clues in the novels, including a “bedroom scene”

in *Northanger Abbey* which “looks a lot like a thinly veiled description of female masturbation” and [place drumroll here] “symbolism” in *Sense and Sensibility*. When Edward nervously cuts up the sheath of some sewing scissors, Kelly spots sexual tension: “The sheath, then, is Lucy, or, strictly speaking, Lucy’s private parts. The scissors are—what, a penis? Robert’s? Edward’s? Or something else even.” In literary criticism, as in the art of comedy, explaining intention without spoiling the original is difficult. While many of the book’s observations are clever, and often true, the readings are deliberately worded so as to maximize a false shock value and present “Jane” as if a barmaid in a Rowlandson cartoon. Perhaps it is a question of tone as well as a misunderstanding about audience.

Yes, Henry James might have squirmed. But will our generation of critics and fans be shocked by Austen’s sexual candor (we know she joked with Cassandra that she had “a very good eye at an Adultriss”) or astonished by her awareness of the physical dangers of childbirth or the injustice of primogeniture? Money, politics, and sex are indeed at the center of Austen’s plots. Which is probably, and I’m just wildly speculating now, why so many people read and reread her novels. The audience for *Jane Austen, The Secret Radical* consists of Victorian readers during the 1890s and today’s non-readers of Austen—who judge without ever having read more than an ornamental pillow’s worth of her books. That’s not us, dear JASNA reader.

Janine Barchas is Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin.

