

Message from the President

Some 32 years ago, I stumbled onto Jane Austen by accident. At least, it was accidental on my part. I was a seventh grader perusing the latest offerings of the Scholastic Book Club when I spied a book that sounded like a pretty good romance. Seventh-grade girls being somewhat inclined toward romance, I plopped down my 45 cents and ordered *Pride and Prejudice*. I've been reading, and rereading, Jane Austen's work ever since.

In discussions with friends similarly "hooked" on the classics, I've discovered that many of us started our journey into good literature at about the same age. These years, roughly 11 to 15, are an age of open minds and unrestrained curiosity, of wild imagination and deepest empathy. They are also an age of susceptibility and peer influence. So it seems particularly important to expose youngsters in these years to the best that life has to offer. In literature, that means Jane Austen.

The entertainment industry has given us a magnificent opportunity to do this. My 15-year-old niece may roll her eyes at her flaky aunt's reading recommendations, but if Hollywood thinks Jane Austen is worthwhile, well, maybe there's something to it after all. At least two projects are under way to help us take advantage of this windfall. JASNA's Illinois-Indiana Region soon will release *Teaching Jane Austen's Novels*, a handbook for high school teachers. Prepared with the help of some outstanding teachers, it includes background information, resource lists, and teaching tips. For younger students, we can learn from Victoria Carson of the Creative Children's Academy in Palatine, Ill. Ms. Carson uses a multidisciplinary approach to teaching classic literature. Students research the period, make costumes, and act out portions of the books. Introduced this way, Jane Austen was enjoyed so much by Ms. Carson's middle school students that they formed a Jane Austen Club. Other opportunities abound if we'll only take advantage of them. A teacher at a classical studies school here in Raleigh, NC, called the other day. She wanted to hold a Jane Austen tea for her sixth-grade girls and use it as a springboard to talk about women's education and opportunities in early 19th century England. Could I possibly attend? You know my answer. I hope yours would be the same. And if no one comes asking, why not create the occasion yourself? Most schools are eager for community involvement.

Between the ages of 12 and 44, I've learned that realism, not romance, reigns in Jane Austen's novels. I've also learned a great deal about human nature, social order, English history, psychology, and, most of all, the art of writing. I will always be grateful to the Scholastic Book Club for introducing me to Jane Austen. As I retire

from office in JASNA, I promise to show my gratitude to Scholastic Books and to JASNA for these many years of enjoyment by sharing my love of Jane Austen with today's young people every chance I get. I hope that you will do the same, and maybe 32 years hence, the president of JASNA will recall the day you introduced her, or him, to Jane Austen.

GARNET BASS
President 1992-1996

Incoming President, 1997



Elsa Solender, New York, NY

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