

Jane Austen

Reviewed By Cindy MacKenzie, *Books in Canada*

Consistently praised for his "inspired pairing of author and subject" James Atlas, editor of the acclaimed Penguin Lives Series, made one of his best matches when he paired Carol Shields with Jane Austen. For, reminiscent of her predecessor, Shields has been "lauded for her keen eye on the nuances of women's lives" prompting Atlas himself to exclaim, "She is our Jane Austen!" Atlas began his monumental project with the intention of modifying the genre of biography in order to address some of what he considers to be its inherent problems, specifically its traditionally cumbersome length as well as the distortion of factual information that each biographer inevitably brings with his or her highly subjective interpretation. These changes have resulted in the production of slim "biographies crafted more like novels, blending the style of fiction with the substance of fact."

As the author of the Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *The Stone Diaries*, Shields has also raised questions about the genre of biography, asking "What is the sum of life? Even when we tell our own life stories, we make alterations, we imagine ourselves through the gaps." Her exploration of the genre in that novel takes the form of what can be called a fictional biography, a "mock biography" of Daisy Goodwill Flett that leaves the reader convinced of the reality of the author's fictional creation. Thus the genre can work both ways, for what Shields aims to record in fiction and in biography is "the genuine arc of a human life," wisely acknowledging the interactive qualities of each genre in that "biography is subject to warps and gaps and gasps of admiration or condemnation, but fiction respects the human trajectory."

In accordance with this perspective, both Shields and Atlas are "on the same page" purpose-wise. In fact, we could say that this is the only kind of biography that can be done of Jane Austen. With so little in the way of facts and artefacts left behind, Austen's life will always be an enigma. Her life is riddled with gaps—there is no diary, no photo, no voice recording and all but 160 of her letters survive, the others burned by her sister Cassandra who no doubt "edited" the most revealing. Shields's methodology follows suit as she "weaving information from here and there," offers a cautious surmise never assuming to have "caught" her subject in a determinate phrase and often allowing differing views to stand. Well-versed in the biographies of Austen from the memoirs of the author's nephew, James-Edward Austen-Leigh, analytical biographies such as Tony Tanner's 1986 publication, those of Honan Park (1987) and John Halperin (1984) and the two most recent publications by Claire Tomalin (1997) and David Nokes (1997), Shields positions herself in a dynamic context that allows the various "lives" to resonate with each other.

In the end, Shields emphatically reminds us, "what matters is the novels themselves, not the day-to-day life of the author, the cups of tea she sipped with her neighbours, the cream cakes she bought at a bakery." "Even," Shields adds provocatively, "her extraordinarily revealing letters must be separated—somehow—from the works of fiction that have survived." Austen's formidable contribution lies in her transforming the novel by bringing a psychological element to it that readers expect today. And, of course, by creating a new kind of heroine—those most memorable women—Emma Woodhouse, Elizabeth Bennett, Fanny Price and Anne Elliott who reinvent themselves through love in the most interesting and complicated ways. But fiction, Shields emphasizes, "does not flow directly from a novelist's experience; it comes, rather, from her imagination." Thus we cannot assume that "Austen's heroines are images of herself, for the point of literary biography is to throw light on a writer's works, rather than combing the works to re-create the author." "The two 'accounts'," Shields continues, "—the life and the work—will always lack congruency and will appear sometimes to be in complete contradiction." Thus, Shields is cautious in making conjectures about the "facts" of her life such as the way in which the parsonage at Steventon, her mother, eight children, Jane's sister and six brothers influenced Jane's temperament and her choices. The numerous male siblings offered Jane and her sister a much more robust kind of recreation than other girls of the period. Shields speculates that "such a childhood may well have given her understanding and sympathy for the way in which young male energy is transformed into gentleness and gallantry, a characteristic of all her male heroes."

Jane's home was marked by "warmth and respect" where Jane had her "books, her pianoforte, and her needlework," a fact that supports her preference to live there rather than at boarding school. Interesting neighbours were inspiring-Anne Lefroy, and her brother James, her French-speaking cousin Eliza bringing with her a dose of French worldliness-manners, books, and attitudes. All of these facts, according to Shields, enter the fictional world obliquely arising from "all that was immediately knowable [to Jane]: families, love affairs, birth and death, boredom and passion, the texture of the quotidian set side by side with the extremities of the human spirit." And it is Jane Austen's acute perception that transforms the daily dramas of her life into the marvelously conceived dramas of her fiction. As for the persistent question of Jane's decision not to marry, Shields poses the sensible suggestion that Jane Austen avoided marriage because of the imposition and indignity of childbirth-and the very real danger of death that she had witnessed firsthand in her brother's wife's pregnancies. But at the same time, she suggests, Jane Austen had probably not given up hopes of marriage completely; she was simply in no hurry, fully aware of the subjugation of women and no doubt very familiar with Mary Wollestonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* published in 1792. Jane Austen's life informs the fiction by way of the transformation of a remarkable literary imagination in a way that Shields describes in the following passage:

Where then did Jane Austen find the material for her novel? Every writer draws on his or her own experience; where else could the surface details of a novel's structure come from, especially a novel as assured in its texture as *Pride and Prejudice*? But it is not every novelist's tactic to draw directly on personal narrative, and Jane Austen, clearly, is not a writer who touches close to the autobiographical core. There is, famously, the gift of an amber cross from her brother Charles and its fictional translation, in which it becomes the topaz cross Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* is given by her brother William. But this is a mere narrative point, not a whole narrative parcel. Some readers have found a resemblance between the fictional Mr. Collins and the real Samuel Blackall, but so little is known about Mr. Blackall that the likeness remains pure conjecture. It is also suggested that the wicked, ruthless Lady Susan is drawn from stories about a wicked Lady Craven, the mother of the Austen's neighbor Mrs. Lloyd, but if this is so, Jane Austen has taken the character of the bad mother and given her intelligence and energy. (pp70-71)

Shields concludes that "what is known of Jane Austen's life will never be enough to account for the greatness of her novels," lamenting that the inscription on her tombstone-"The benevolence of her heart, the sweetness of her temper, and the extraordinary endowments of her mind obtained the regard of all who knew her, and the warmest love of her intimate connections"-makes no mention of "her six great novels, her literary offspring, her own 'darling' children." No life can match the fantasy of the ideal refuge, but, says Shields, in a way that confirms the enlarged 'reality' of blending fact and fiction in her own biography, "Jane Austen herself, laboring over her brilliant fictions, creates again and again a vision of refuge furnished with love, acceptance, and security, an image, she herself would be able to call a home of her own."

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