

Jane Austen by Carol Shields (Phoenix, R110.95)

3 March 2002

Cassandra Austen, Jane's elder sister, frustrated the curiosity of posterity by burning the larger part of Jane's extensive correspondence after her death at the age of 41. Add to this devastation a kind of conspiracy of piety on the part of the Austen clan, a cult of Aunt-Jane-the Saint, as Carol Shields calls it, and it is clear why Jane Austen is such a poor candidate for biography: there is simply not enough material to feed the fires of such an enterprise.

And yet biographies continue to be produced, new interpretations and restructurings of the meagre material appearing almost every year. Carol Shields, herself a respected novelist, has used her own insights into the creative process to interpret such facts as we have of Austen's life, her method being to add two parts of speculation to one part of fact. I quote at random: "Everything we know about the family tells us that her reading was likely to have been unsupervised and random. Her father's bookshelves would have been open to her, and probably this good-hearted, busy man did not trouble to direct her choices . . . Not much is known about what she read." The string of likelys and probablys and would haves, issuing in an anti-climactic non-fact, is entirely characteristic of this work.

Shields' speculative technique is at best intriguing, at worst unconvincing. Either way, it is not, and does not pretend to be, a matter of scholarship. The book is innocent of footnote or reference, and its list of sources is respectable rather than adventurous. As criticism of the novels too, it has little new to offer: Shields expresses indebtedness to Lascelles, Butler and Tanner, the latest of which was published in 1986, and in her own readings does not explore, for instance, the whole range of reading opened up by feminism, except to touch in the mildest way upon the plight of women in the early nineteenth century. She repeats the old chestnut, based on a misreading of one of Austen's letters, that *Mansfield Park* is about "ordination," without apparently asking herself how it could possibly be so. She does, however, contribute the fresh observation that Jane Austen's novels contain no "hips, thighs, shins, buttocks, kidneys, intestines, wombs or navels and scarcely a single mention of toothache."

Shields' book then, is not intended for the Austen specialist or the academic. It seems likely, in fact that it is intended for the Carol Shields enthusiast with a passing interest in Jane Austen - as the publisher would seem to imply by printing Shields' name above Austen's, in considerably larger type, with the two names separated ambiguously by the phrase "The Number One Bestselling Author".

Be that as it may, Shields enthusiasts will find much here to interest and divert them. Shields offers an overview of Jane Austen's works, not only the novels but also the Juvenilia and letters, in relation to the life - though she is careful to avoid any simple transfer from the life to the literature. She writes sensibly, unsensationally and unpretentiously, and her conjectures generally come across as plausible extrapolation of the known facts.

Shields' very reluctance to confine her subject to a doctrinaire interpretation does at times leave the reader impatient for a firmer grasp of the subject. Was Jane Austen really only truly happy when in the bosom of her immediate family, as Shields would seem to suggest - or was she, as is elsewhere hinted, limited and confined by such lack of privacy? She could have been both, of course; but Shields does not so much hint at ambivalence as adopt the two readings alternately.

And on the vexed question of Jane Austen's grasp of and interest in the social questions of her times, Shields simply contradicts herself. Moved to defend her subject against the charge of withdrawal from such questions, she writes, at the beginning of her study: "With the accurate placement of Bath in her

Shieldstx.txt

contemporary universe she proves herself an astute reporter on sociological change." The presence of the soldiers in *Pride and Prejudice* she calls "a sociological certainty that was fully comprehended by the author of six novels written over a stretch of unsettled time and each of them offering its historical commentary". Of the same soldiers, she says much later: "The presence of the military, so crucial to a book like *Pride and Prejudice*, is sketched in, but the professional activities of soldiers, the historical context, is left out." And by the end of book she claims "Her legacy is not a piece of reportage from the society of a particular past, but a wise and compelling exploration of human nature." There is no reason, of course, why a piece of reportage could not also be a compelling exploration of human nature, but Shields seems to feel that the two are mutually exclusive: "Her novels are set in contemporary England, but her characters and their adventures are of the imagination - so much so that it might be thought to be a deliberate choice on her part to separate life and literature."

Such nitpicking on the reviewer's part does violence to the good-natured, affectionate enterprise that this biography undoubtedly is. But to anyone concerned about the level of evidence found acceptable in literary debate, such carelessness seems ultimately counter-productive, lending support to the view of literature as an imprecise, woolly business.

In all fairness I should add that the lukewarmness of my enthusiasm for this book is shamed by the glowing reviews it got elsewhere. I advise readers to buy the book and judge for themselves.