

January 5, 2019

Dear Helena Kelly,

The brunch menu was tempting, but when I saw the headline “A Jane Austen Fit for the Age of Brexit,” I couldn’t resist reading the review of your book, *Jane Austen, The Secret Radical*, in Sunday’s paper instead. The bicentennial of Austen’s tragic death at forty-one gave me fresh opportunity to return to her literature, and to remember past encounters with her work. When my mom first read *Emma* to me at bedtime, much of the plot’s delicate social dance, full of suggestion and obfuscation, floated over my (admittedly drowsy) head.

Now that I’m older and can understand more of the intricacies of the characters’ interactions, I can appreciate the bigger questions and themes at play in the novels. I’ve always disagreed with critics, both contemporary and modern, who considered Austen’s literature to be overly proper, insubstantial, uncontroversial - and from the first pages of your book, it was clear that you agreed. You mandated we re-read Austen, not just to make sense of the drawing room dilemmas, but to uncover the revolutionary commentary on social issues like enclosure, women’s rights, slavery, and evolution that you found hidden underneath the books’ elegant exterior.

With due respect to your exhaustive scholarship, I quibble with some of your stretchier hypotheses about Austen’s secret radicalism; some of her political leanings contradict your claims, and despite Jane’s love of Lyme, would Louisa Musgrove’s stumbling upon a fossil truly constitute a prediction of evolutionary theory? Maybe Austen’s brilliance lies not in her largely unknowable opinions, but in her audaciously innovative literary technique. But no matter; your willingness to wade into controversial territory changed my perspective not only on Austen’s works, but the literary and political world of today.

As the title of that book review reminds me, your quite political book is relevant to today’s world in more ways than one. You justify your fearlessly revisionist take on Austen’s true intent by reminding us that Regency England was not a permissive society, especially when it came to speech; the Authoress was forced to state her views obliquely for fear of offending the king and other powerful personages. You ask several times in your book how Elizabeth Bennet or Austen herself would have voted on Brexit; it’s fun to speculate, but the question reminds us of the freedom we now have to voice opinions on such subjects. Yet even today our liberties of speech can become insidiously eroded or threatened outright. Just as Meryton and its villagers’ lives were set astir by the arrival of the Bingleys, in a single moment, I, too, became suddenly aware of the rough edges of my existence.

One breezy day this past summer, Annapolis was in gridlock when a gunman shot five journalists at the *Capital Gazette* headquarters. My mom, a community editorial board member, had been forced to skip that day’s meeting. By that simple twist of fate, her life was spared. My mom’s been my teacher and the most enthusiastic nurturer of my intellect and my imagination: at the time of the shooting, she and I had been browsing the Maryland Archives, reading historic editions of the *Gazette* dating back to the eighteenth century, when my country and yours were at war.

You write that, from Austen's teenage juvenilia through to the completion of her masterpieces, her country was at war across the world. Though the *Maryland Gazette*, as it was known at the time, was able to publish heated arguments between Charles Carroll and Daniel Delaney on the Revolution - dialogues that influenced Maryland's assent to the Declaration of Independence - the tighter controls on public opinion back in Britain forced its turn-of-the-century novelists and thinkers to adopt a subtler approach in their criticisms of government, society, and endless war.

I'm an aspiring journalist myself, proud to say that I've written a column or two for *The Capital*. The intellectual daring of a book like yours - coupled with the reminder that some writers, such as Austen, did not have the privilege of speaking their minds directly - inspires me to lay out my own perspectives without fear, but also with that trademark British restraint. I may be an as-yet insignificant kid in a different time and place, but your journalistic discoveries in Austen's timeless literature have sparked my creativity and urge me to defend the rights of all of us to say what we mean, and say it in style.

Although she never evaluated or summarized her own work, we may begin to know Austen through her countless letters; in one, she informs her sister Cassandra that she wrote only for those who had "a great deal of ingenuity themselves." With your help, I think I've come one step closer to becoming an informed, astute citizen - and a more ingenious Austen reader.

Keep up the great work,
Storrie Kulynych-Irvin