

WOMEN WHO READ



By Ellen McGrath

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Austen at 250

On the Ground at the Jane Austen Society of North America's General Meeting

In October, I had the privilege of attending the Jane Austen Society of North America (JASNA) Annual General Meeting (AGM) in Baltimore. This conference celebrated the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth in 1775, and its theme was Austen at 250: "No check to my genius from beginning to end."

The quote is in Jane Austen's own words, from a letter sent to her sister Cassandra on Jan. 21, 1801. This was my second AGM experience after attending the previous year's, held in Cleveland. By comparison, this year's was bigger, with more "celebrities" from the Austen universe.

The AGM is not a book festival, but rather a full-blown conference focused on all aspects of Austen's life and work. It included a fashion show, screening of the top entries in the Young Filmmaker's Contest, session on the virtual recreation of her first home (demolished in 1822), and pop-up museum of artifacts. The program also featured workshops on dance, Regency calling cards, paper quilling and cravat tying.

You may wonder who qualified as an Austen "celebrity." Number one on my list was Caroline Jane Knight, the fifth great-niece of Jane and the last to grow up in Chawton House. In the late 18th century, Chawton belonged to Edward Austen Knight, one of Jane's older brothers. He changed his last name to Knight when he was adopted by a relative and later inherited Chawton. Edward allowed Jane, Cassandr and their mother to live in Chawton Cottage on the estate grounds after their father passed away. Caroline, who now lives in Australia, came to Baltimore for

her first AGM, bringing with her the actual Wedgwood china that Jane ate from.

Next on my list was actor Susannah Harker, who played the iconic role of Jane Bennett in the 1995 British television drama **Pride and Prejudice**, adapted by Andrew Davies and also starring Colin Firth. Ms. Harker was interviewed by Gabrielle Malcolm, whose relaxed and humorous manner made this session so enjoyable. Amazingly enough, Ms. Harker's mother had also played Jane Bennett in a 1967 film version.

The other celebrities were Jane Austen scholars, who researched and wrote a multitude of books and articles about Jane. Biographer, literary critic and novelist Dr. Paula Byrne kicked off the program with her keynote presentation on "Biographical Method and the Art of Reflection." Byrne contrasted the older philosophy of male biographers, which dictated that the focus be only on the good aspects of the subject, with the current approach that gives a full picture of the subject's life. She stated a phrase that cropped up frequently throughout the conference, that "money trumps race" in Jane's works.

Another plenary speaker was Dr. Vanessa Riley, who wrote more than 25 novels that

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spotlight hidden narratives of women of color. Riley emphasized that in Jane's time, many knew of and were touched by slavery. Jane did not stereotype; she portrayed all types of women, including Miss Lambe in **Sanditon**.

One panel presentation on "Catching Austen 'in the Act of Greatness': Four Perspectives" featured Dr. Janine Barchas, Dr. Inger Brodey, Collins Hemingway and Dr. Devoney Looser, with Dr. Susan Allen Ford moderating. Barchas characterized herself as a reluctant Janeite, but says she is now a happy convert, who teaches about Jane. Brodey championed Jane as a master at capturing voices and using the free, indirect style of writing before it was even identified as such. Hemingway embraced Jane's exploration of small things deeply. Looser admired Jane's rejection of the norms of her day and celebration of the anti-perfect.

A few scholars lobbied for their own favorite book adaptations, including **Jane Austen in Boca** by Paula Marantz Cohen (2000 adaptation of **Pride and Prejudice**), **By the Book** by Julia Sonneborn (2018 adaptation of **Persuasion**), and **Ladies of the House** by Lauren Edmondson (2021 adaptation of **Sense and Sensibility**).

Dr. Juliette Wells is the author of several works about Austen and professor of literary studies at Goucher College, near Baltimore. Goucher is the official home of JASNA's records and the Alberta Burke collection of Jane Austen books and manuscripts. Wells described the detective aspect of investigating Jane Austen artifacts. She also co-curated the 2025 exhibition "A Lively Mind: Jane Austen at 250" at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York City.

Dr. Theresa Kenney, author of **Last Impressions: Jane Austen's Endings**, presented on the complex sense of secrecy in Jane's works, particularly in marriage. Rebecca Romney gave a presentation called "What Book Collecting Can Tell Us About Austen, Her Favorite Women Writers, and Their Readers." Romney discussed how Jane did not rush the publication of her novels, but kept revising and polishing them. She listed authors of the time that Jane liked to read and emulate. **The Mysteries of Udolpho** by Ann Radcliffe is one such work and it is referenced in **Northanger Abbey**. Romney, author of **Jane Austen's Bookshelf: A Rare Book Collector's Quest to Find the Women Writers Who Shaped a Legend**, stated that while it was difficult to determine what the common reader of her time thought of Jane's novels, much can be learned

by examining who owned which books and how they annotated them with owners' markings and marginalia. Dr. Elaine Bander presented a session on how Jane Austen transformed the Georgian heroine. Jane's heroines have agency and make their own happy endings.

Deborah Charlton is an archaeologist who led the 2012 dig at Steventon Rectory, where Jane spent the first 25 years of her life. Steventon was demolished in 1882, but in Jane's time it was a working farm, dairy, and brewhouse. Most of the work was done by women, including Jane, especially when there were not enough servants to help.

The AGM culminated in a banquet, followed by a promenade of all those in period dress and a Regency ball. I have attended many professional law library and general library conferences during the course of my 40-year career, but those all pale in comparison to the JASNA-AGM!

Note: JASNA "is a non-profit organization staffed by volunteers and dedicated to the enjoyment and appreciation of Jane Austen and her writing." It costs \$30 (digital) or \$45 (with print) to join. Benefits include publications, newsletters, access to regional groups, online presentations and discount registration to the AGM. (<https://jasna.org/>)■

Looking for more Jane? Check out these retellings or books inspired by her work:

Emma of 83rd Street by Audrey Bellezza & Emily Harding
Eligible by Curtis Sittenfeld

Emma: A Modern Retelling by Alexander McCall Smith
Jane & Austen by Stephanie Fowers

Ladies of the House by Lauren Edmondson

Austenistan by ed. Laaleen Sukhara

The Private Life of Mrs. Sharma by Ratika Kapur

The Bollywood Bride by Sonali Dev

Pride, Prejudice, and Other Flavors by Sonali Dev

The Other Bennet Sister by Janice Hadlow

Longbourn by Jo Baker

Becoming Jane Austen by Jon Hunter Spence

Jane Austen: The Secret Radical by Helena Kelly

The Real Jane Austen: A Life in Small Things by Paula Byrne