

prodigious. Immersed in Austen's predecessors in the development of English literature by women, Todd has written definitive biographies of some of these foremothers, specifically Mary Wollstonecraft and Aphra Behn, as well as encyclopedias of women writers and complete editions of Wollstonecraft, Behn, and Austen. Like Fanny Price's brother William, in *Mansfield Park*, with his own impressive achievements (at a very young age!), Todd "has a right to be listened to."

She provides discreet yet tantalizing glimpses from her own decades of relating observations of current female experiences to what she found in Austen. Of course, Austen was an author who, ever the artist, showed just exactly how much she wanted to show—no more or less. It takes a scholar of Todd's caliber, writing with shrewdness and grace, to distill a lifetime's insights into her subject while telling us, "I hope ... I can convey a little of the excitement that still overwhelms me as I go on reading Jane Austen" (11).

In her first chapter, "The Brightness of Pemberley," Todd discusses the "ancestors" of Pemberley, such as the great house in one of Austen's favorite novels, Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*. Like Grandison, Darcy is "defined by his large house," (23) and in "The Darkness of Darcy," she examines this hero's mastering attitudes. These are filtered through her experiences in immigrating to academic America in the 1970s, when the field of women's studies was getting underway. She asks, "In the old feminist terms of the 1970s, is Darcy not Patriarchy itself, with all its glittering, merciless, unequal glamour?" (53).

Seeking her place in the academic world, Todd wrote her seminal *Women's Friendship in Literature* (1980) as a gesture toward current literary theory, afterward returning to England to become "the happy biographer of little-known women" (86). Now looking back, as through a beloved garden, she wanders in her memoir among topics enlighteningly and enjoyably treated, such as "Poor Nerves," speculating that Austen's letters are "nervous" ones. "How could the creator of the perfect fictional sentence write those tumbling-over-themselves letters?" (98). In other chapters—with titles such as "The Unruly Body," "Advice," "Talking," and "Making Patterns"—Todd rambles through her own mind and Austen's as she admits that as a girl she made extracts à la Mary Bennet, and suspects Austen did the same.

On politics, Todd has come to a different view than when she strove to bring Wollstonecraft and Austen closer together in liberal, internationalist views. Growing up when a patriotic Englishness was still strong, built on "an almost abstract love of country and countryside" (195), she asks, "But may we not allow her to feel something just a little like what was so prevalent in the 1940s and '50s? Would it be so odd?" (195). For, unlike Wollstonecraft, Austen "never questions the morality of her country's political system or its imperial adventuring" (197).

The book fittingly finishes with a moving chapter on "How to Die." Death, Todd observes, always seems to hover on the edge of comedy in both Austen's letters and the novels, but Austen "showed fortitude in life, patience in death, kindness and gratitude in both" (232). Austen, she concludes, "can't be used for divination ... but if you

open any page of her novels, you can find a good sentence" (233). And there are many good sentences, as well as illuminating ideas, in this eloquent examination of Todd's own life pacing by the side of Austen's. The result is a generous sharing of both writers' spirits and high abilities.

Diana Birchall, retired from her career as a story analyst at Warner Bros., is author of numerous Austen-related novels, stories, plays, and essays, as well as a biography of her grandmother, the first Asian American novelist.

COMIC GENIUS

The Novel Life of Jane Austen: A Graphic Biography

By Janine Barchas

Illustrated by Isabel Greenberg

Full-color illustrations throughout

Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers (2025)

144 pages; hardcover, \$28

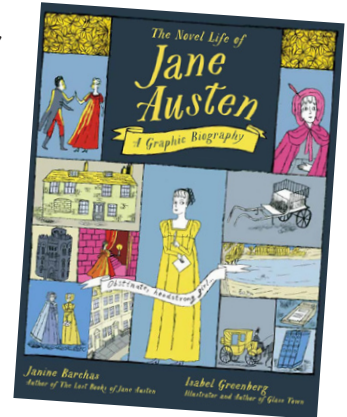
Review by Emma Kantor

Jane Austen didn't travel far in her 41 years, but wide reading expanded her knowledge and experience far beyond the confines of the Regency drawing room. This brisk yet brimming graphic biography sets

out to explore the question, "How did Austen emerge as a literary powerhouse of her own?" (from the "Note to Reader" in the introduction).

Collaborators Janine Barchas and Isabel Greenberg prove themselves more than fit for the task, dramatizing pivotal moments in the novelist's private and creative life that informed her characters and plots. Austen scholar Barchas has written several books about the author and created the digital project "What Jane Saw," which reconstructs two Georgian art exhibitions witnessed by Austen. Greenberg is the author-illustrator of graphic novels including *Glass Town: The Imaginary World of the Brontës*, and has a gift for animating the interior lives of writers.

The timing of the book could not be more auspicious, as the 250th anniversary of Austen's birth is upon us. It's also a welcome companion to the recent *Miss Austen* television series, based on the novel by



Gill Hornby, which offers a window into Cassandra's point of view as sister, confidante, and keeper of Jane's literary flame.

The Novel Life of Jane Austen unfolds in three parts, following Austen's years as "Budding Writer," from 1796–1797; "Struggling Artist," from 1801–1809; and "Published Author," from 1809–1817, transporting us from Bath to Southampton to Chawton. The illustrations are rendered in fine lines, calling to mind the delicate scratches of quill on paper.

Throughout, Greenberg depicts the Austen sisters in complementary hues, with the dark-haired Jane dressed in yellow and the fair-haired Cassandra in blue. It's a clever visual shorthand that allows us to single out each of the women while also symbolizing their strong sisterly bond: Together, they create green, a color suggesting the growth and renewal of spring. Jane's flights of fancy, in which she imagines scenes from her various novels-in-progress, take on a warmer color palette of red and pink. Her creative ardor is palpable when reading aloud from her manuscript for *First Impressions* (what would later become *Pride and Prejudice*). The family's collective enjoyment of her stories only makes the initial rejection by publishers more painful (part 1, chapter 2).

A trip to Bath with Cassandra to visit the Leigh-Perrots, their aunt and uncle, is the perfect balm for Jane's disappointment. "If adventures will not befall a young lady in her own village, she must seek them abroad." That famous line from *Northanger Abbey*, referring to heroine Catherine Morland, is here spoken by Jane (part 1, chapter 4). Sure enough, her sojourn in Bath provides ample material for her next novel. But the charm and novelty of the city wear off when Rev. Austen announces that they are to move there upon his retirement. A period of upheaval follows his death as the three Austen women seek to find a new home in Southampton with their limited means. They ultimately settle in Chawton Cottage, where Jane spends her most content and productive years.

Greenberg stages the death scene with gentle pathos. In a two-page spread, Jane lies in a canopy bed, wrapped in the cozy cocoon of a yellow-and-blue quilt, emblematic of the Austen sisters; she is also

surrounded by her heroes and heroines, who are clad in pink (part 3, chapter 13). The action then fast-forwards to contemporary times, showing Austen fans making their literary pilgrimage to Jane Austen's House. This apt and poignant coda brings the book full circle, hearkening back to early scenes capturing Jane's visit to the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery in London in 1796 alongside her brother Frank (part 1, chapter 1). After the author's lifetime of financial precarity and professional ups and downs, Austen's name and work are now hallowed alongside that of Shakespeare and other giants of English literature.

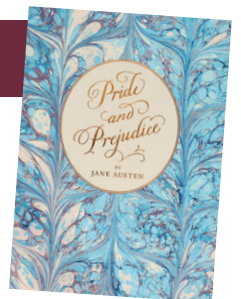
The final image takes up an entire page: Jane and Cassandra appear arm in arm in their signature colors of yellow and blue, looking on as a visitor approaches Chawton Cottage, accentuated with green lawns and ivy. *The Novel Life of Jane Austen* celebrates both women as individuals as well as their joint legacy that Cassandra took such care to cultivate—even if modern readers may lament her pruning of Jane's letters due to concerns about privacy and propriety.

For such a slim volume, Barchas and Greenberg succeed in evoking not only the everyday reality but also the emotional lives of Austen and her family—especially her beloved Cassandra. And for readers who wish to delve deeper into the world of the Austens, the endnotes offer an enriching guide to the many Easter eggs—including quotes from Austen's novels and correspondence, Regency-era context, and other details—that populate the panels.

Emma Kantor is a Brooklyn-based writer, comedian, and senior children's books editor at Publishers Weekly.

SPECIAL 250TH ANNIVERSARY EDITIONS

Pride and Prejudice: Collector's Edition—The Complete Novel, Featuring the Characters' Letters and Papers, Written and Folded by Hand. Curated by Barbara Heller. This eye-popping, lavish new edition builds on the 2020 (merely) deluxe edition. Published in two volumes in a beautiful marbled slipcase, it offers historically accurate paper, luxurious bindings, five new pieces of ephemera (including a newspaper clipping, invitation to a ball, and marriage license), as well as contributions from noted Austen scholar Juliette Wells and Morgan Library curator Philip Palmer. (Chronicle Books, \$80)



Northanger Abbey: The Collector's Edition. Distinguished Austen scholar Janet Todd provides an insightful new preface along with extensive endnotes for this edition, placing the novel in its cultural, historical, and literary contexts. (Cambridge University Press, \$24.95)

Jane and the Blue Willow Princess by Catherine Little, art by Sae Kimura. A charming picture book for young readers that uses the blue willow pattern on the Austen family china as a springboard for a fanciful story of Jane (already a writer) and Cassandra Austen as children. (Plumleaf Press, \$24.95)

—Reviews by Betsy Groban, JASNA News book review editor

