



## Jane Austen and Shelley in the Garden: A Novel with Pictures

**Janet Todd**

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With consuming literary passion, Janet Todd's complex novel combines the past and the present together with the living and the dead.

Fran is a widow who spent her life immersed in teaching, reading, and gardening. Her retirement (and her reluctant glances at herself in mirrors) reminds her that she is getting on in years. The thought of making a major life change while there's still time plays at the edge of her mind.

Somewhat obsessed with Siberian recluse Agafia Lykova, who cracked nuts with her teeth while alone on the tundra, reclusive Fran thinks, "I may have to learn to live with people before it's too late." But Fran is not alone: the ghost of Jane Austen haunts her, making unsolicited comments on her thoughts, beliefs, and choices. Though sometimes resentful of Austen muttering in her ear, Fran accepts that her presence "makes the world a little less cold."

Then Fran bonds with two other women over their mutual love of literature: Annie, a longtime English friend, and Rachel, an American writer. Under the influence of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley's dreams of a utopian community, the three contemplate creating a home together—a hedge against a lonely old age. Putting their musings aside, the women find a place together, only to have to serve time in lockdown there as a "family," with the ghosts of Jane Austen and Shelley happy to inhabit their garden.

Mirrors play an important role in the tale: reflecting the passage of time, highlighting the difference between outer appearances and secret inner lives, and forcing confrontations with mortality. Hints of the homoerotic arise and are tantalizing.

*Jane Austen and Shelley in the Garden* layers emotions within the intellectual discourses of a literary community, thinning the veil between what's real and imagined.

KRISTINE MORRIS (September / October 2021)

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