

Jane Austen

Deirdre Le Faye

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Such a predicament Jane Austen created for her future biographers! When illness took her from this world at age forty-one, she left no husband, no children, no memoirs and no contemporary press coverage. Aside from her literary accomplishments and enduring popularity, this remarkable early nineteenth-century author seems to have had a rather unremarkable life, but one which devoted readers reasonably suspect was the inspiration for her witty and fascinating novels.

Because Austen's fiction was the comedies of manners, romance and society in which she lived, devoted readers have long wondered, who was Jane? The independent and sensible Elizabeth Bennett of *Pride and Prejudice*? Or the matchmaking heroine of *Emma*? This volume won't satisfy such curiosity, as Le Faye has refrained from drawing connections between actual persons in Austen's life and characters in her fiction. Instead, she offers more than a few clues for the intrepid Austen investigator as she connects the dots between real events and places in Austen's life and those in her novels. Although Jane herself left few tracks, we are fortunate that many of her family and extended relations did.

As part of the British Library's writer's lives series, this lavishly illustrated volume draws upon the Library's fine collection of original manuscripts and letters, along with letters and portraits of Austen family and friends in the Jane Austen Memorial Trust and private collections. The most rewarding material is provided through the letters, which is not surprising considering it is about the only evidence Jane left of herself and the material on which Le Faye, as editor of a collection of Austen letters, is an expert. Although these letters to and from Jane do not provide great insights into the inspirations for Austen's fiction, it does give a sense of the author as a witty, intelligent, self-assured and amiable person, just like many of her heroines.

The weakness of this biography is that Le Faye's narrative ability does not equal her research skills. She has painstakingly recreated Austen's travels and movements, along with the pertinent activities of Austen's closest friends and relatives, and has even provided readers with a copious assortment of names, dates and places. This is rich material, but the reader wishes these elements could be connected as part of a story, and less a recitation of fact. Yet one suspects that to accomplish this with any degree of satisfaction would take the skill of, well, Jane Austen.

SHARON FLESHER (March / April 1999)

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