

Book review

Jane Austen

by Carol Shields

Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 2001

Reviewed by Pamela Nutt

This is one of a series of biographies whose subjects range from St Augustine to Andy Warhol, from Mozart to Marlon Brando. This volume on the life of Jane Austen is written by Carol Shields, a novelist shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1993 and winner of the Pulitzer Prize.

As biographies go, this one is a slim volume (154 pages.) The advantage of this is that it can be read at a very few sittings, or at a single sitting on a self-indulgent day. The expected disadvantage (that it will skim over material dealt with more fully and satisfactorily in a range of recent biographies of Austen) is not the dominant impression gained in reading Shields' account of Austen and her work. This is largely because this work is very consciously the reflections of one writer on the life and work of another. Shields' response is shaped by the fact that she is one of 'those who interest themselves in the creative art'. She feels the anger Austen directs to the publisher Crosby and Co as they neglected to publish *Susan/Northanger Abbey*. It is an 'outrage (which) can be understood by any contemporary writer who has been treated in a disrespectful way by a publisher'.

Shields also feels particularly Austen's writing 'behind a wall of isolation' at Steventon and at Chawton. Writers, she believes 'are hugely dependent on the shared experiences of other writers' and that, although Austen had 'sympathetic readers', she lacked the 'shared presence...friendships and correspondence' that Shields herself values.

The years spent in Bath and the 'abrupt cessation of her novels' during this period is also understood by Shields from the writer's perspective. Citing Virginia Woolf, Shields reminds us that a writer does not need stimulation, but rather its opposite, regularity – 'the same books around her, the same walls...self-ordered patterns of time, her own desk, and day after profitable day in order to do her best work'. None of these qualities characterised Austen's life in Bath. The 'delicate balance between solitude and interaction' was disrupted.

That Austen achieved what she did – alone – is central to Shield's admiration of her. Indeed, Shields presents a picture of Austen which often emphasises her loneliness in the family as well. She makes much of Jane Austen's coolness at times to her mother, to her brother James, and even towards Cassandra at one period of her life. Aspects of the novels' heroines reflect, for Shields, aspects of their creator's own capacities, but it is Anne Elliot who 'combines Austen's sense of loss and loneliness, her regrets, her intelligence and, in the end, her unwillingness to lead a disappointed life'.

This is not to say that Shields' portrait is predominantly sad or gloomy. It certainly isn't. The excitement of being in print and the impetus and confidence that this gave to Austen's work are once again viewed through the eyes of a fellow-writer.

So, the emphasis in this book is on the act of writing – its models, processes, frustrations and joys. The details of Austen's life are familiar, and Shields acknowledges a very respectable list of sources, most of which will be familiar to Austen devotees. Aspects such as Mrs Austen's arrangements for her young children, Jane Austen's schooling, family details, Tom Lefroy, the move to Bath, a chronology of the novels, Harris Bigg-Wither, life at Chawton and Austen's final illness are dealt with more fully, and at times more accurately, in many other places.

Even in this abbreviated form, however, they are connected well by the biographer to the development of the writer and her work. The point of literary biography, Shields believes, 'is to throw light on a

writer's works, rather than (to comb) the works to recreate the author'. There is, unfortunately, some evidence that Shields did not 'comb the works' carefully enough. Something is lost when Shields refers to 'Mr Knightley (providing Emma) with lists of improving books he hopes she will read'. It is much more fun to picture, as Austen did, Emma's making and disregarding these lists herself.

At times I have to admit to being frustrated by longer biographies of Austen, not because of their deficiencies, but because finding the time to give adequate attention to them is not always an easy matter. Shields' approach to her subject has the advantage not only of introducing readers unfamiliar with this material to some details of Austen's life but also of creating succinctly, strongly and memorably an impression of Austen and her work.

It is also a relief to find that a contemporary novelist is more concerned with writing about Jane Austen than with writing in the style of Jane Austen.

- Pamela Nutt