

*Prism Review Canon Interview: Jane Austen*

On a recent full moon night, we were driving our editorial van through the Inland Empire, our blocky-mass of suburbia unfolding east of Los Angeles up until it hit the San Bernardino mountains. We felt uneasy and restless. Why were we in the van? What errand, impetus? We passed through the endless stream of towns . . . we were tired, glazed . . . the van smelled of our youth . . . we didn't like it . . . the air was thickly Inland, that after-fog, that dog breath of coastal breezes that finally, stale and stiff, gasps into our surroundings. We chewed mints by the handful. Our throats tingled and burned. We felt itchy all the way through the western-themes town of San Dimas . . . we felt too guilty to stop for donuts in Glendora . . . we rolled our eyes at the shuttered stores in wishfully ritzy Claremont, pretending not to be jealous of those Claremont College kids and their dormitory maid-service . . . the winds of Rancho Cucamonga wailed . . . and finally, gladly, we made it home.

La Verne. The sky paled with dawn. A baker moved in silhouette within Miss Donuts and Bagel. The locals started into Roberta's Village Inn. Coffee was on the air. An adjunct university instructor nearly ran over two students in pajamas. Construction workers smoked outside the new campus center. We walked through the tree-lined streets, saw families taking down city election fliers. A McCain-Palin sign stood stubbornly on one green lawn. We passed a small house we'd never seen before, a black sign out front, promising spiritual connection. The fee was small. We checked our pockets, we had pockets, we had fee. We went in, shy and nervous, the air smelled of sandalwood, a curtain shifted, and we sensed that beyond a woman stood. Her voice was soothing, reassuring. We asked if she had any warm milk and she told us to sit quietly. We walked to the window and stared out. She appeared before us, she was small, kindly, eyes of two different colors. We disagree about the colors.

She took our hands and said the spirits were strong, so strong, and her visage twisted and voice changed and she clenched our hands tight and suddenly she was gone, suddenly we were face to face with a pale and shy British citizen. She seemed familiar, like a nanny we'd once had, or at least seen in a film, the quiet one who never disciplined us. Gradually we recognized her as a young writer with a modicum of fame, the up-and-coming author of *Northanger Abbey*, that thrilling meta-mystery in the style of Paul Auster but more ornate, less obviously in need of intellectual affection. Jane Austen, in the flesh. Of someone else.

PR: Are you comfortable? Can we get you anything?

JANE AUSTEN: It's cold in here. Is it cold in here?

PR: Can someone -- ? (A member of our staff runs to the van and returns with a blue-and-white blanket bought years ago in Tijuana. Jane wraps it around her shoulders, then sniffs and frowns. The blanket remains.)

JANE AUSTEN: Why thank you, you are so kind. If you do not mind my asking, why did you call out to me?

PR: (Murmurs sift through the staff). Actually we were looking for a good breakfast place. But really, we're glad you're here! Ms. Austen, would you mind answering questions?

JANE AUSTEN: (gestures kindly for us to proceed)

PR: You wrote your novels during the Romantic era, between Augustan and Victorian movements. Your works predate the intricate and encompassing social webs of Dickens and Eliot and the loving emphasis in nature found in the works of your closer peers Ann Radcliffe and Fanny Burney. How can you account for your uniqueness?

JANE AUSTEN: Simply, I was not of the world. This world you speak of - you share many things in your life. In my own, the things were my own. My experiences. Fanny and Ann wrote of their experiences, of course, and these experiences very rarely were similar.

PR: You lived in a time with a great lack of heterogeneity.

JANE AUSTEN: Indeed. And for that I am grateful.

PR: Your novels of love tap into a huge readership: women. Do you ever feel that your works stereotype the interests and needs of women?

JANE AUSTEN: Absolutely. But you must understand that stereotype - it's a word, isn't it? A label. An idea that follows the thing. We did not have names for things before the things themselves. I never wandered gardens with baskets of words, hoping to find the right flower for each. And so my works are my works, my ideas, my hopes, my fears. That they are called stereotypes is the classification of men in small poorly lit rooms with reading glasses. The works do not change.

PR: What are your feelings on matrimony? Do you believe marriage is more about security or insecurity?

JANE AUSTEN: I've said it before and I'll say it again, "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favor of matrimony." Despite this, I continue to remain single and I do believe that union is more about insecurity. I feel that people turn to marriage as some sort of salvation from the drub and rut. And too I am quite sad about the state of marriage these days, particularly the divorce rate. I think it is caused by all the distractions you have, computers, television, games. This world seems to have lost all its romance, I mean when was the last time any of you received a love letter carefully written in calligraphy with a quill pin? When was the last time you stared longingly out the window? A girl did this, you know. For years and years before marriage. That is a great investment one does not let go of so easily. Much more than, say, a night in Vegas. Two weeks of love. These things are passing fancies, not bone deep, not marrow.

PR: How have you been passing your time, Ms. Austen?

JANE AUSTEN: Most I've my time I've spent at a public water fountain in an English plaza. I swim; I dip my toes in the turning water, and I watch children throw pennies wishing for sweet pecks from their crushes. Boring. I know how this sounds, but it is a splendid place to let time wash over you; things don't change much even when the faces of the children do. In this place I can forget the things about the world that are not too pleasing. But do not misunderstand me, this does not mean there is nothing about this modern world I find quite marvelous.

PR: We're fairly young but we have such hopes for the future. We're worried, even, about ever being satisfied. We don't mean concern about the economy and etc. - just the human capacity for infinite need. Does it ever end?

JANE AUSTEN: I believe that when we, humans, are most in tune with ourselves, we can fulfill most any of our needs. Some people find it in love, I found mine within family. Others get lost in money and societal charms. I find that disheartening. But I do believe mankind is unhappy because you are surrounded by so many others. You poor people of today - you are thronged about by so many millions, on television, in film, neighbors, buses, cars, co-workers. I would go many days seeing ten people. There was less to compare myself with, you see.

I think that when we see the happiness of others we ourselves feel unhappy. The only way to avoid unhappiness in your world, I think, is through stupidity or by becoming a monk. Which is just avoidance - it avoids the challenge. Your lives are very difficult, plumbing aside.