Jane Austen & Company: Collected Essays
by Bruce Stovel; edited by Nora Foster Stovel

Reviewed by Mary Barnes

Long an admirer of Jane Austen, I picked up this book because of its title alone. Scholarly books can be daunting, confusing and sometimes dry, so imagine my surprise when I opened the pages of Jane Austen & Company and discovered that the writing sparkled. The author’s love for the works mentioned in his collection spills over and captivated me. And in her introduction, Nora Stovel, the late author’s wife and editor, explains this passion, that his love for particular stories were such that he would read them aloud to her while they did the dishes.

Bruce Stovel knows how to communicate and with a deft hand he lifts the comedic element from each of the stories, that of Greek heroes to the modern ones of Kingsley Amis and Evelyn Waugh, and it is through this component we come to realize we are not gods but mortals and therefore imperfect. Too, Stovel maintains that Jane Austen’s writing and those of her contemporaries as well as those who wrote before and after her time are meant to bring pleasure and laughter to their audiences. Did not Mr. Bennet once say, “For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them, in our turn?” (Pride and Prejudice, 372)

About Tom Jones and The Odyssey, the author writes, “It is their depiction of a just and harmonious world that makes us think of the Odyssey and Tom Jones as comedies” (xviii). He goes on to relate that both heroes continue their epic journeys and have a number of adventures that appear catastrophic, but both stories have fortunate endings and the heroes and their loved ones are all the better for the journey. By following along with the characters, we come to know them, and even commiserate with their misguided undertakings.

In the essay “Asking versus Telling,” Stovel states that “telling is easy and asking is hard, because telling is a one-way communication . . . while question-and-answer is a two-way exchange. Question-and-answer is thus the core element in conversation . . .” (97).

Such exchanges can bring the element of surprise, knowledge and laughter, revealing the nature of the characters in a story, ones we can relate to. The exchange between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet the day she discovers there is a new owner at Netherfield is one such example:

“Do you not want to know who has taken it?’ cried his wife impatiently.
“You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.” (95)

This is probably one of the most famous exchanges between the two. Mr. Bennet, mocking his wife’s question, does so in an endearing way; Mrs. Bennet, a silly and shallow woman but mindful of her daughters’ futures, responds by telling him the news. This exchange comes from a couple that has long lived together and knows each other’s hearts.

In “A Contrariety of Emotion,” the author speaks of Darcy and Elizabeth in Pride and Prejudice as polar opposites. The lovers do not like each other when they first meet, yet what one finds disdainful attracts the other. The author writes, “But one lover’s expression of this hatred only increases the other’s fascination” (117).
It is this contrariness that holds our interest, flowing in and out of various situations for the length of the novel, which then ends happily. Stovel gives this love-hate relationship between the lovers the term ambivalence; a term not used in Austen’s time, he says, but is applicable nonetheless. The playful push and pull of emotions only deepens our longing to have the couple unite.

Jim Dixon, in Kingsley Amis’s Lucky Jim, is a luckless fellow under the complete domination of his employer, Professor Welch. In the essay “Traditional Comedy and the Comic Mask,” Stovel argues that “Jim’s faces function as a modern version of the comic mask: they create the holiday world of the comedy, just as the masquerade – the donning of masks – does in traditional comedy” (204). Jim survives in his world by wearing public masks, a different one to suit each occasion, in the hope he will be successful. What he discovers is that he must shed the mask in order to be his true self. As Stovel confirms, “Jim must outgrow his secret and self-pitying faces by sharing them, by communicating his vital powers” (214).

Stovel’s essays scintillate and so they should. If laughter can be defined as a spontaneous movement in expressing lively amusement, then the aforementioned authors and others in this book have succeeded, and Bruce Stovel’s appreciation of what they have accomplished makes me want to pick up The Odyssey and wonder on the disguises of its hero, or Pride and Prejudice and chuckle at the antics of Mr. Collins, or Lucky Jim and enjoy Jim Dixon’s journey to self-revelation – to read the books with new eyes and exit laughing.

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