



Among the Janeites: A Journey Through the World of Jane Austen Fandom

By Deborah Yaffe

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For anyone who has ever loved a Jane Austen novel, a warm and witty look at the passionate, thriving world of Austen fandom

They walk among us in their bonnets and Empire-waist gowns, clutching their souvenir tote bags and battered paperbacks: the Janeites, Jane Austen's legion of devoted fans. Who are these obsessed admirers, whose passion has transformed Austen from classic novelist to pop-culture phenomenon? Deborah Yaffe, journalist and Janeite, sets out to answer this question, exploring the remarkable endurance of Austen's stories, the unusual zeal that their author inspires, and the striking cross-section of lives she has touched.

Along the way, Yaffe meets a Florida lawyer with a byzantine theory about hidden subtexts in the novels, a writer of Austen fan fiction who found her own Mr. Darcy while reimagining *Pride and Prejudice*, and a lit professor whose roller-derby nom de skate is Stone Cold Jane Austen. Yaffe goes where Janeites gather, joining a pilgrimage to historic sites in Britain, chatting online with fellow fans, and attending the annual ball of the Jane Austen Society of North America—in period costume. Part chronicle of a vibrant literary community, part memoir of a lifelong love, *Among the Janeites* is a funny, touching meditation on the nature of fandom.

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Editorial Review

From the Back Cover

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About the Author

DEBORAH YAFFE worked as a newspaper reporter in New Jersey and California for more than thirteen years covering education, the law and state government. She lives in central New Jersey with her husband, her two children, and her Jane Austen Action Figure.

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Chapter 1

Dressing the Part

The bottom drawers of Baronda Bradley's dresser are filled to overflowing with kid gloves, ballet slippers, stockings, feathers, lace collars, nineteenth-century coins, smelling salts, period playing cards, drawstring reticules, a vintage sewing kit—all the accessories with which she augments the breathtaking Regency outfits she wears to each year's Annual General Meeting of the Jane Austen Society of North America. A walk-in closet holds her thirty size 6 gowns—the green-and-orange with striped silk overlay, which premiered in Seattle in 2001; the flowered silk brocade day dress, from Los Angeles in 2004; the square-necked, pale-pink georgette with hand-embroidered bodice; the dark red with cutout sleeves and matching long velvet coat; the lace-and-silk confection so daringly low-cut that, at the Vancouver ball in 2007, she armed her friends with a code word (“Shakespeare!”) to deploy if they noticed a hint of areola peeking out.

By mid-2011, when I visited Baronda at the ranch house in Fort Worth, Texas, that she shares with three children, two cats, and a large boa constrictor named Honeybun, she had become a near-icon of the JASNA AGM—“Baronda of the two thousand dresses,” as she had been dubbed at Milwaukee in 2005. She was

hardly the only person to attend the AGM in period attire—many dressed up for the Saturday night ball, and some also wore bonnets or morning dresses to the daytime lectures and discussions—but Baronda took JASNA costuming to a completely different level. In 2004, seven years after her first AGM, she had begun wearing Regency outfits not only throughout every moment of the conference but even en route, from the minute she left home until the minute she returned several days later. Wearing her bonnet onto the airplane was easier than finding space for it in a suitcase, and besides, she liked the stir she caused strolling through the airport in a floor-length, Empire-waist day dress. In her elegant gowns and headdresses, she felt different. “I’m no longer the usual mom, out there playing soccer or being graceless,” she says. “I know that as soon as I step out the door, I’m on display, and people are watching.” For JASNA conference regulars, anticipating Baronda’s new outfit had become part of the familiar yearly ritual.

It hadn’t always been this way. Back in 1983, when I attended my first JASNA conference, the Saturday night program featured a sober lecture on *Emma* delivered by a distinguished Jane Austen scholar. No one cleared away the tables after the banquet so we could promenade through English country dances in high-waisted gowns, feathered turbans, and opera-length gloves. Not until the early-twenty-first century did a Regency ball, period costumes optional, become a regular feature of JASNA’s AGM. But over the years, perhaps influenced by the visions of silk and lace in all those Austen movies, more and more people began dressing the part. Even the men, rare birds at a JASNA AGM, were squiring their be-gowned wives and girlfriends in cutaway coats, knee breeches, and brocade waistcoats. These days, a costume parade through the streets surrounding the conference hotel, with bystanders snapping cell-phone pictures of dressed-up Janeites, often preceded the dancing.

My reaction to these developments could be summed up in a single sentence: *I will not be caught dead wearing a period costume to a Jane Austen ball.*

I have always had a vexed relationship with clothes. I find shopping at best dull, at worst depressing—a recurrent reminder of how far my real-life body diverges from the ideal. I buy off-the-rack separates in dependable solid colors, own as few shoes as possible, and accessorize so rarely that when I had my ears pierced for the first time on my fortieth birthday, my brother dubbed this uncharacteristic fit of eccentricity my “midlife crisis.” Playing dress-up in costume is just as unappealing to me. As a child, I never much liked Halloween; the sugar rush couldn’t fully redeem the weeks of angst over what to wear. As for the adults who attended the JASNA ball in Regency attire—well, I was quite sure I was Not That Kind of Jane Austen fan. Yes, Baronda looked stunning in her many gowns, but to me dressing up seemed the province of the goofy, nostalgic types who were ready to trade modern life, with its antibiotics and feminism, for some imagined ideal of elegant living.

And yet, one spring day, there I was on eBay, searching for Jane Austen–style Regency gowns. *How did I get here?* I wondered helplessly, as I rejected the “1960s—VELVET—brown—BABYDOLL—Jane AUSTEN—Hippie—Dress,” which appeared to be so short that even Elizabeth Bennet’s wild sister, Lydia, would have hesitated to wear it in public.

The answer, of course, was research for that book the Jane Austen tarot cards had urged me to write. If I was going to discover what made my fellow Janeites tick, if I was going to experience the Janeite world in all its glorious diversity, I would have to immerse myself in aspects of the fandom that had never appealed to me. Interviewing Baronda of the two thousand dresses wouldn’t be enough. I would have to overcome a lifetime of resistance to dress-up and wear a Regency gown to the JASNA ball. And with that ball less than six months away, I couldn’t dither much longer.

Baronda Bradley wasn’t used to being admired for her appearance. Growing up in a lower-middle-class family in a small town near Fort Worth, she often felt invisible, or out of place. Her parents, who had blended their first names, Ron and Barbara, to create hers, exacted harsh discipline at the end of a belt. “They were very much ‘spare the rod, spoil the child’ people,” Baronda says. Saddled young with adult responsibilities for her two younger brothers and for the children who used her mother’s in-home babysitting service, Baronda felt more comfortable with adults than with her peers. She sang, played the piano, excelled in school, and developed consuming interests that she stoked with intensive research. She read everything in

the house—her father’s car books, her mother’s dog books, whatever was stacked on the top shelf of her closet. One summer, she checked out every one of the public library’s books on cats. She was the smart girl, and the smart girl doesn’t get to be the pretty girl.

With no college-going tradition in her family and no money for tuition, Baronda knew she would have to make her own way. When she earned scholarships that would help pay her costs at the University of Texas, the congregants in the conservative Southern Baptist church her family attended were torn: some feared she would lose her way in the den of iniquity that was Austin, Texas, but others envisioned their bright girl, with her gift for languages, making a wonderful missionary’s wife. At college, Baronda studied psychology and French and played percussion in the band. Gradually, she drifted away from the no-drinking, no-dancing, submit-to-your-husband values she had grown up with. And she worked, paying the costs her scholarships didn’t cover with earnings from an array of different jobs. Eventually, she was working twenty to thirty hours a week.

It was all too much—the long hours at work, the academic course load, the depression that began to creep over her as she confronted the emotional fallout from her childhood. In more than one course, she squandered good grades when she fell into a funk and skipped the final exam. After three and a half years in college, her GPA was so low that she was on academic probation. Her college boyfriend was already attending medical school, and she decided to drop out, join him in Galveston, and get married. She started therapy and took a job as a 911 dispatcher, sending ambulances and police cars to emergencies and fielding less-than-urgent calls from lonely people who just wanted to talk. Her coworkers were smart and capable, but none of them had aspired to this job; their lives, like hers, had somehow veered off track. “That was what helped me to determine I needed to go back and get my degree, or I’d be around people who were underachievers all my life,” Baronda says. She went back to school, finishing with a major in French and minors in psychology and classical civilizations. Reading and writing, she realized, were what she most enjoyed. When her husband’s training took them to Indianapolis, Baronda found a diverse, intellectual Methodist church to attend, took a day job with a software company, and began studying for a graduate degree in English at night school. A professor recommended Jane Austen.

Baronda’s Jane Austen was a swift, ironical satirist, a writer who could sketch a character in one or two tart, definitive sentences. In *Persuasion*, whose heroine gets the chance to reverse a life-changing, long-regretted decision taken at the behest of a family friend, Baronda found an added resonance, a reflection of her own journey from the constricting world of her childhood to the greater freedom she had begun to find in college. “It’s the story of being told one thing and making choices around that, but then being given an opportunity to exercise your own desires,” she says. “Kind of like my life.” Despite my eBay frustrations, I figured it couldn’t be that hard to find a Regency gown. Jane Austen managed it, and she didn’t have the Internet.

The post-Firth upsurge of interest in Austen’s life and works has carved a niche for merchants selling everything from reticules to spencers (or, for the uninitiated, from drawstring purses to short buttoned jackets), and on the World Wide Web, every Janeite cottage entrepreneur can find a home and a customer base. Years before there was an Internet, Jennie Chancey was a teenager who started sewing her own clothes because she yearned to look like the title character in the *Anne of Green Gables* miniseries. In college, in the 1990s, her old-fashioned clothes earned her the nickname “the Anne girl,” and she launched a small sewing business catering to young women with similar tastes. With the advent of the Internet, she took her company online, named it Sense and Sensibility Patterns, in tribute to the writer she loved, and began selling designs for Regency gowns to women who wanted to make their own. In an Austen-worthy irony, modern technology facilitated a return to a pre-industrial handcrafted aesthetic.

By 2010, Chancey was selling as many as two hundred patterns a week and netting \$20,000 to \$30,000 a year. Although she sold patterns from other historical periods too, she estimated that 70 to 80 percent of her customers were Regency enthusiasts, many of them planning outfits for Jane Austen festivals or evenings of English country dance. Eventually, Chancey took more than a dozen of her customers on a summer tour of Austen sites in England. On the bus, they watched a movie version of *Persuasion*, pausing the DVD now and

then to critique the costuming. “Somehow, putting on the clothing of the time lets you step into somebody else’s experience,” Chancey says. “And I think that’s the experience that Jane Austenites are looking for—how can I step into Jane’s period as much as is possible and just feel a little part of what it’s like to be in the Regency.”

I certainly wasn’t going to sew my own gown—reattaching lost buttons is about the extent of my expertise with needle and thread—but the whole Regency costume enterprise was turning out to be much more complicated than I had realized. Finding a gown, I had learned, was only half the battle; with Regency clothing, the big question is what lies beneath. The Regency silhouette features breasts pushed up to an impossible height—“the shelf look,” it’s called—and held there by a boned corset that laces up the back. Modern underwear that I’d never heard of (the balconette bra?—who knew?) could approximate the look, but only imperfectly. “It is impossible to achieve a historically accurate look without the proper corset or stays for your time period,” one costume website lectured. “A proper corset will make the difference between looking like a princess who has stepped out of an historic painting or looking like someone on their way to a modern costume party.” Of course, I *was* on my way to a modern costume party, but still, who wouldn’t rather look like a princess?

Luckily for me, the Regency corset wasn’t meant to achieve a Scarlett O’Hara–style eighteen-inch waist—that look became fashionable later in the nineteenth century—but it was still hard to imagine actually wearing this bizarre and probably uncomfortable undergarment, especially since I didn’t employ a lady’s maid who could help me into it on the night of the ball. I imagined wandering half-dressed through the halls of the conference hotel, looking for a sympathetic Janeite to lace me up before the clock struck midnight and my coach turned back into a pumpkin. Were there period-correct alternatives? Several costumers told me about so-called short stays, which resemble a sports bra and were rumored to be fairly comfortable. But when I investigated further, I learned that short stays were recommended for the young and slender, a category that most definitely did not include me. Rebecca Morrison-Peck, a Janeite costumer from Vancouver, Washington, mentioned the boned-bodice petticoat, a historically accurate undergarment that you could, just barely, put on by yourself. “It’s buttoned at the top of the back very, very tightly, and you can pull it around and button it in the front and then swing it round and squeeze your arms in the very tight little straps,” Morrison-Peck said. “I’ve done it, and it’s like a monkey with a deck chair. It’s not a pretty sight.”

All right, I told myself. The corset is out. The balconette bra is in.

But after a few dispiriting hours scrolling through websites I had never imagined visiting (Frederick’s of Hollywood?), looking at come-hither pictures of models in low-cut satin push-up bras, I was depressed and dissatisfied. All these conversations with costumers; all these hours spent at websites with names like Austentation, window-shopping through pictures of seed-pearl hair combs and cameo brooches; all this talk of stepping into the Regency experience: it had done something to me. *If I’m going to do this, I might as well do it right*, I found myself thinking. The corset was back in.

In fact, I realized, I was becoming slightly obsessed with corsets. I seemed to be working them into every conversation. At lunch one day, I told my husband about how proper Regency eveningwear called for breasts elevated practically to chin level and necklines low enough to display show-stopping quantities of cleavage. His sudden enthusiasm for the corset project was startling. “What about stockings?” he asked. “You know I’m a stickler for historical accuracy.”

Historical accuracy, I was learning, doesn’t come cheap. Whereas even custom-made Regency gowns could be had for perhaps \$150, made-to-measure corsets ran \$200 or more. And which company should I order from? One website seemed on the less expensive side, but could I bear to patronize a merchant who spelled Jane Austen’s last name with an “i”? I could splurge on a \$375 corset, but that site featured a testimonial from Madonna’s stylist, which seemed way out of my league. I wasn’t planning to wear *just* the corset, after all.

With five months to go until the ball, I had to make up my mind. Until I had the underwear, I couldn’t get the gown, since achieving the Regency shelf look would change my measurements. One day in May, I took a deep breath and ordered the “1815 corset” from an online company called the Very Merry Seamstress. It cost

\$260, plus another \$20 for the shipping. I hadn't spent this much on a dress since my wedding, and this wasn't even the dress.

In October 1997, Baronda Bradley was a graduate student in English who needed academic credentials to fatten her résumé. She prepared a presentation on Jane Austen and the British landscape painter J.M.W. Turner and headed off to JASNA's AGM in San Francisco. She'd heard that people sometimes dressed in costume, so she rented a beige satin gown for the ball and spent the evening dancing with an acquaintance. Neither of them knew much about English country dancing; they would barely master the steps for one dance before it was time to start another. That weekend, Baronda noticed a couple who dressed up throughout the conference, in both day- and eveningwear. "I thought it was elegant and graceful, and I admired that there were these people who didn't care that they were doing something different, because I was already of that mindset anyway," she says. "And so I just thought, 'Well, that looks kind of fun. Maybe next year I'll have a couple of pieces.'"

But it would be four years before she went to another AGM. In the interim, she and her husband moved back to Fort Worth and had two sons. Baronda worked for a while, stayed home with her kids for a while, and went back to school, thinking she might pursue a doctorate in English.

When she finally had time for another JASNA conference, she turned to the Internet, finding a seamstress in Colorado who produced three new dresses for the 2001 Seattle AGM: a red-and-white day dress with a matching spencer, an ice-blue satin afternoon gown, and an elegant green silk. Slender and well-proportioned, with long blond hair that held a curl, Baronda looked every inch the Regency belle, and she drew compliments wherever she went. After a lifetime as the smart girl, she was suddenly the beautiful girl. "It was like I was Cinderella," she says. "It was like I was the homecoming queen, and they had me leading the ball." The next year, she decided, she would have to wear something even more spectacular.

Users Review

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