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Cassandra and Jane
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Q: How faithful is your rendering of the relationship between Cassandra and Jane Austen to their real-life attachment as siblings?

A: Very faithful indeed in my view. Each was the most important relationship in each other's life. They always shared a room and clearly missed each other greatly when they were separated. As first, the only two girls in a family of boys and later as two maiden aunts in a family where children were plentiful, they occupied a special place for the rest of their relations who often saw them as a couple rather than as two separate people in spite of their very different personalities.

Q: How much of *Cassandra & Jane* is the work of your imagination? For example, were the sisters' love affairs grounded in actual encounters?

A: It is a novel, not a biography so of course some of it is imagined—the content of the 'missing' letters for example. But I believe I have been faithful to known facts in so far as they exist. Cassandra's romance and engagement with Tom Fowle is well documented, as is his subsequent sad death and the fact that Cassandra never sought another suitor. As for Jane we certainly know about her flirtation with Tom LeFroy and its unhappy outcome. We also know that as an old man Tom confessed he had been in love with Jane but realized it was impossible for them to marry because they were both poor and he had a duty to marry well. This theme is so re-current in Jane's work that it was clearly something understood in society at the time and no doubt for Jane had been emphasized by this early experience.

The Bigg-Withers proposal, acceptance and subsequent rejection is also well documented but I have of course imagined Cassandra's part in helping Jane to decide to reject such an advantageous proposal of marriage.

The Reverend Mister Atkins, the encounter at Lyme and its consequences is imagined though one of Jane's nieces did say in later years that her Aunt Cassandra had spoken of a clergyman who admired Jane whom they had met at a sea side resort. I have always been intrigued by Mansfield Park and the fact that its morality theme is very different from the rest of Jane's work so I tried to weave the reason for that into the story and made it the consequence of her brief love affair with Mr. Atkins.

Q: As an ardent admirer of Jane Austen, how did you feel as a writer of historical fiction about taking liberties with her life?

A: I try to take as few liberties as possible with her life—I ensure for example that all the dates are accurate and I would never have her visit a place to which I know she did not travel. But I do try to imagine her feelings and of course I do not actually know what those were. I do not know for example that she suffered a depression during the ten years in which she wrote virtually nothing but I can readily imagine that for someone like her, all the moving about they did at that time, having no settled place and therefore no opportunity to pursue the writing which was so important to her, might well have led to a depressive illness. So I suppose I use known facts and then expand on them to suggest what might have been. If I need an excuse for what may seem improper, it is that I do it always with great admiration and love for her as a woman and as a writer.

Q: To what extent do you think Cassandra's decision to burn Jane's correspondence was a sage one?

A: Well, it was a sage one to her, however hard it may seem to her sister's devoted admirers. I believe she was determined to keep to herself the parts of Jane's character which she herself perceived as 'difficult'. She had been very reluctant for Jane's identity as a writer to be known at all but once it was she wanted to guard her from any kind of 'warts and all' analysis. In fact all the family colluded in that as will be evident from Henry's preface to the last publication and the wording on Jane's tomb in Winchester Cathedral. We should not forget that being a 'lady writer' was still not seen as entirely respectable in the early eighteen century and I think Cassandra's instincts were entirely about protecting Jane's memory.

Q: How do you explain Jane Austen's continued popularity with readers from all walks of life?

A: Looked at dispassionately, her popularity is astonishing. She lived a modest life in rural England two hundred years ago; never travelled more than 30 miles from her home and died unmarried at 41. She kept no diary and we do not even know for certain what she looked like. Yet for so many readers, to read one of her novels is to be 'hooked'. We love her for her wit, for her elegant and sparing prose and for her sharp—occasionally very sharp indeed—observations on human behaviour. Perhaps most of all we love her for the romanticism of her stories. We love to read of a poor heroine marrying a rich man, of misunderstandings being overcome, of devotion being eventually rewarded. I think we love her subtlety too—whether the way she pokes fun at the ridiculous or the way she evokes passion and commitment by a glance, a gesture, a word. In these days when emotion is always on display and life long commitment in short supply perhaps we all yearn a little for the refinements of that bygone age.