

CANTERBURY SAVOAS WRITERS' 2017

CELEBRATION
of JANE AUSTEN
TALES OF LOVE & FRIENDSHIP

FIRST - *Mary Bennet Admires the Mute Swans*

SECOND - *Ease & Exertion*

THIRD - *Lyme Revisited*

SHORTLIST

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Ease & Exertion

Lyme Revisited

Agony Aunt Jane

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Mary Bennet Admires the Mute Swans

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The AUSTEN Report RHYME AND REASON

I gravitated to stories that, although inspired by Jane, peeled back a layer, and imagined something new about a character, either familiar or invented, and I was drawn to stories that had a little something of our own time thrown in. After all, 200 years gave the opportunity to say what Jane couldn't, when her swathes of wit and longing swirled inside her prose like the patterning within the marble, and lay neatly tucked under the smooth veneer of her civil sentences.

FIRST PLACE - *MARY BENNET ADMIRES THE MUTE SWANS*

“How else can Mary distance herself from their travelling sideshow of improprieties more effectively than to quote from Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*?”

Mary Bennet Admires The Mute Swans

Mary Bennet Admires The Mute Swans is an inventive, well-thought-out, and humane look at class and gender restraints, with a beautiful use of language.

The subject is a less popular *Pride and Prejudice* Bennet sister, Mary, and centres on her frustration at the limitations on the Bennet sisters as ‘women in need of husbands’. That irritation is twinned with the imposition she feels her gender is on determining her fortunes, and her personal persuasions are pertinently mirrored in the dance of the mute swans.

“Even a swan's lifetime can be an excruciatingly long dance with a foolish partner.”

She is inwardly mortified with the socially aspirant, gauche pushing forward of Mrs Bennet, and Mary's pious facade is a deliberate design to evade her “nonstop barrage of marital hectoring”.

The writer enhances the world with some beautiful solidity of specification, “A burst of wind blows seed pods onto the girls and Kitty is engrossed with removing them from her hair,” and description and dialogue in Austen-like free indirect speech show us Mary's behaviour in private, which contrasts with the two-dimensionally pious personality of the original.

The writer has taken the bellows to Mary, here she's alive with the flames of humour and a sardonic vivacity, she's a good mimic, even mocks her sisters' conveniently prosperous attachments, describing Jane's Bingley as having "the personality of a bowl of soup", and suggesting Darcy 'started looking a lot more appealing' to Elizabeth after she'd seen the size of his estate, 'too proud until she got a tour of Pemberley.'

Complicated, clever, and not just religious-book-smart, she's able to adopt a front, or perhaps, cornered, and feeling she must hide because of her sexuality, creates a self-righteous cage that in a way, is what sets her free, or as free as she can be. "Mary has cultivated a public face akin to a puritanical wall, which only a very hearty soul would attempt to scale."

That soul comes in the form of neighbour Maria Lucas, the nature of their friendship made clear through Mary's copy of Sappho's *Ode to Aphrodite*, and in a secret visit that concludes the story. "Come to me now once again and release me from gruelling anxiety. All that my heart longs for, fulfil" reads wistful Mary. "And be yourself my ally in love's battle" responds Maria, appearing unseen by the others at the door.

The use of the titular imagery of the swans is beautiful, and of Mary, it's said, 'She hides her true self from almost everyone, as her true self would be a liability'. Something about that, made me think of Jane, at her portable writing desk, hand-over protective, all those thoughts, observations, feelings, frustrations, constraints and unfulfilled desires, poured into her work, reaching across from the drawing rooms and society of her own time, where her true self might be considered a liability, leaving an eternally romantic heart in her novels and in the immortal characters we connect to and still adore today.

SECOND PLACE - *EASE AND EXERTION*

"Selfishness must always be forgiven you know because there is no hope of a cure."

Mansfield Park

So quotes humble, sweet Mr Trickey in his thwarted attempt at love and library theft, in *Ease and Exertion*. From the minute he stumped up the library stairs with the traces of autumn stuck to the bottom of his cane I liked him, with his freshly dyed autumnal hairdo, 'matching nature's autumnal dregs rather nicely'. With original, brilliantly named characters, the story is obscure and fresh, and the way the characters inhabit the story managed to make

me believe in their existence before and after it'd finished. But it was the writer's choice of Austen's words and what they meant to Trickey in his musings on love and exertion that caught me, how, quoting from *Mansfield Park*, if you *are aware* of being selfish, he considers, you can surely do something to stop it, it is *exertion* then, to *bother* doing the right thing, that it comes down to, and which ultimately doesn't happen here. We see in his nemesis, the devious Dr Sly, Trickey's '*consciousness of Dr Sly's having more luck than was deserved*'. Leaving the lady he loves, '*in the bliss of unknowingness*', we see he has '*reached the hour of his greatest exertion*'. Pipped to the romantic post yet full of dignity, and sadly, a sense of cynicism, the hope of words spoken earlier in the story stayed with me, "*Perhaps just giving others the benefit of the doubt was another way of exerting oneself.*"

THIRD PLACE - LYME REVISITED

'The young people were all wild to see Lyme.'

Jane Austen

In *Lyme Revisited* we join a group of Austen admirers and academics on a three day conference to Lyme, to revisit sites seen by *Persuasion's* Anne Elliot.

Our narrator, Annie, has a knowing academic air, but a romantic, humorous heart. I found it an enjoyable, good *old-fashioned* bit of *modern* Austen-inspired, 'keeping it all sardonically in' with that seemingly undetachable English politeness that so many of Austen's heroines have, in the face of peoples be they smug, impertinent, downright rude and sometimes, shamefully improper...And there are some lovely descriptions of Lyme.

'Now a faded holiday resort for families with young children and some vestiges of Regency elegance, the bay at Lyme and the Devon cove beyond is pretty rather than arresting, and offers riches to the youthful fossil hunter rather than a watering place for the aristocracy.'

It's a portrait of a woman getting her life together after the disappointment of divorce. An epistolary section reveals her hopes of reconciliation, which her former husband rejects, while the enigmatic presence of Dr Smith, who she'd imagined as '*an older man, hair*

receding, peppered now with white hairs, with a rather bullish Wordsworthian craggy face' is delightfully there to catch her in her very own fall from the Cobb.

A tidily structured reflection of the original, another echo I appreciated in the Anne Elliot-like loneliness present in the narrator, was the sense of Lyme being the chance to let the past go, acknowledging in a diary entry, 'I am breaking away from him, and I need to revisit some of these places and appreciate them as a single person, not through anyone else's eyes'. That's a nice mirror of *Persuasion* itself, where likewise, the lesson the original Anne Elliot has to learn, is to recognise her feelings for Wentworth with her own heart, and not through the eyes of another.

SHORTLISTED - AGONY AUNT JANE

A sweet story about the cleaners of Winchester Cathedral, a gaggle of rude mechanical like ladies sharing a blithe, sort of unassuming intimacy with the great writer, when, on their treasured, highly orchestrated tea breaks, they gather ceremoniously to read letters left for Jane on her grave, that they've collected into a biscuit tin.

It didn't, as in Lise Friedman's book, *Letters to Juliet*, attempt to answer them, and *Northanger Abbey's* Catherine Moreland came to mind, when accused of a complexity she claims not to have, contradicts with the dazzling, 'I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible.' The beautiful character of Bonnie, who has down syndrome, holds out a sweet ray of hope, and adds unexpected depth to the playful humour and grotesquerie. The ending took me off guard, and makes me teary.

'For the remainder of the shift, Bonnie sat in the Lady's Chapel holding the biscuit tin. The Reverend Joan once told her she had a whole and unbroken heart and that she should try to imagine hope for the authors of the notes and letters. She squeezed her eyes shut for as long as she could imagine. After several minutes of great effort, Bonnie opened her eyes and got up from her seat and wandered around the Chapel. She loved looking at the pictures on the wall of a lady performing miracles in the lives she touched, heartbroken lives. Bonnie opened the biscuit tin. The contents, for all the worlds, lay silent. Touching the notes, she hoped with all her might that she could one day write her own letter. "Dear Jane," she would begin...'

SHORTLISTED - *HONOUR THY MOTHER*

This is a modern American family portrait from a mother's perspective on a 70th birthday holiday, courtesy of her five daughters. Suitably for mother 'Sally Bennet' who we first encounter on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, she is imagining the envy of others, as she sits contemplating, proudly, her definition of beauty, which includes, of course, her own ageing variety. It had some standout sentences, like when Sally, having suggested the family farmhouse as the holiday setting, describes why she feels her geographically divided daughters resisted, 'The official reason was that they didn't want her to do all the work that would involve. The real reason was that they regarded the farm as a level of privation, less than one star...And maybe they were a little afraid of what they might find, falling asleep at night in their childhood beds, in that passage between waking and sleeping where truth happens in the guise of dreams'.

An interesting look at the love and friendship or lack of that can exist between families, who find themselves technologically generations apart, and sometimes, simply personally incompatible, with only love, the spectre of tragedy, and filial honour to bind them.

THE LONGLIST

Pleas and Persuasion, the only fully epistolary entry, in the voice of *Mansfield Park*'s Thomas Bertram, who, having ended up renouncing the new-found prudence Jane Austen bequeathed him, is languishing in a Dublin jail begging for help. A knowledgeable and cleverly characteristic use of voice.

There was some powerful descriptive writing in the paragraphs of *Cakes*, a Goan-inspired, spiced take on *Emma*-like matchmaking, with the beautiful opening sentence, 'When the monsoons varnished the single tarred road of Benaullim, you had a choice of two places in which to be, Tony Braganza's café or the world of your own balcao...' The power of this writer is in their accomplished and vivid descriptions.

Soul Sisters, was an evocative piece about character and class, with no direct reference to Austen whatsoever. With some fine sentences, it captured the dialogue of characters in a declining 'freindship'. "I had a weird relationship with Maria, unlike any I had with anyone else. I hardly ever saw her, but when we did meet, we talked a strange and esoteric patois which must have been near impenetrable to anyone else." It connected with the theme in a modern way, and used some lovely, suspenseful imagery, 'We spotted each other at almost exactly the same time, and pressing through the crush of people seized each other's arms. She looked pale, but then she always did, and her Rossetti like appearance, was enhanced by the cloak she sometimes wore assembled from an old yellow velvet curtain.' It caught at the strange quality of the ties of old friends who, having grown apart, and onto different paths, no longer have the compatibility needed to keep them tied together.

An Ode to Sensibility was a well-composed lament of *Sense and Sensibility*'s Marianne on the death of Colonel Brandon. Sweetly, musically written, it has nice details of sonnets being read under willow trees, and where love flows in the alliterative key of 'f' where, 'many young things had left flush with the flickering first flames of infatuation'. I almost thought it was going to be a Cathy-kind of ghost story, so soft was the tread of Marianne on her familiar staircase, so full of sadness, and the fluid way she swept through the Barton Park landscape to the room of her dying husband...A brilliantly cheeky reference to one of the children having distinctly un-Brandon, more Willoughby-esque origins...

Loosening the stays of Jane Austen is set in a company producing board games, and the layout included pages with squares of board game phrases, an original idea with a sense of humour. I *actually* saw a *Pride and Prejudice* board game crop up on Pinterest after reading.

Ice and Fire is a modern story, of the narrator's experience of two sisters, the warmer fiery Marianne to Eleanor as ice queen girlfriend. Well-drafted, with good use of dialogue.

After Box Hill showed skill in characterisation, with the unmistakable, grating voice of *Emma's* Mrs Elton in a non-stop chattering narrative. I'm tempted to want the writer to lift the lid on what Mrs E *really* thought, what might be *underneath* that drove the need for such self-aggrandising, but, I think I've had more than enough of Mrs E and her Caro Sposo!

I'd thank every writer who took time and creativity to craft a story, all touched by the skeins and threads of Love & Freindship. It was a pleasure to read, and to see the pleasure in Jane Austen with writers inspired to take all shapes and voices, and so the fragments survive... I wish all the writers well in their future writing, *and* reading, because as we all know, 'the person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid'.

Victoria Grainger