

REVIEWS

COMPLETION BOND

*Another author takes
a crack at Jane Austen's
final novel fragment*

JANE AUSTEN'S CHARLOTTE.
Completed by Julia Barrett.
M. Evans and Co.,
240 pages, \$21.95

BY SARAH COLEMAN

There are authors who are just plain authors, and then there are authors who inspire cults. Nearly 200 years after her death, Jane Austen has achieved the latter status. As well as being the toast of literary salons and academic journals, she's found her way to Hollywood and, in recent years, to cyberspace, where scores of devoted fans post "missing scenes" and "continuations" of her novels. "Janeites" (as the hard-core fans like to call themselves) just can't get enough of Austen, so there's only one rational solution: Write more.

What is it about this reclusive 19th-century writer, burned into our minds as the mousy-looking thing in a cotton bonnet, that inspires these imitations? One charming explanation comes at the back of a 1975 edition of *Sanditon*, Austen's final fragment of a novel, completed by a writer modest enough to refer to herself only as "Another Lady." In an afterword to her own contribution, this lady suggests that "ever increas-

ing numbers, seeking to escape the shoddy values and cheap garishness of our own age, are turning to the past to catch glimpses of life in what appear to be far more leisured times."

Sanditon is clearly the ultimate test for any Austen acolyte. Amateurs may want to tinker around with tea trays and carriages, but toughened pros go straight for the unfinished novel. Julia Barrett, the latest writer to take on a "completion" of the *Sanditon* fragment, already has two Austen-inspired novels to her credit: *Presumption* (a sequel to *Pride and Prejudice*) and *The Third Sister* (a sequel to *Sense and Sensibility*.)

Unfortunately, that extensive experience hasn't brought her any closer to the spirit of Austen. Barrett's completed novel, now renamed *Charlotte* (a better sounding title, as well as one with crossover appeal for Brontë fans) is overplotted, far-fetched, and almost completely lacking in charm. Like a bad drag act, it wears the right gowns and accessories but sounds a false note every time it opens its mouth.

Jane Austen wrote *Sanditon* in the last months of her life. In 11 short chapters, she does little more than set up her principal characters and scenes. The setting, however, suggests the tantalizing possibility that Austen was about to tackle a social satire larger than any she'd previously written. Unlike her other novels, which are set mostly in removed country villages and estates, *Sanditon* takes place at a town on the English coast, which two of the main characters are attempting to turn into a coastal resort on the order of Brighton or Eastbourne.

As usual, Austen creates an alter ego in the form of a pretty young woman with a lively mind. Coming to *Sanditon* as an outsider, Charlotte Heywood quickly observes the quirks and intrigues of its principal residents. Lady Denham (who, along with Charlotte's host Thomas Parker, is *Sanditon*'s developer) has adopted the beautiful but penniless Clara Brereton, who appears to be having secret assignations with Lady Denham's foolish nephew, Sir Edward. Add to this cast a trio of hypochondriac siblings, a West Indian heiress, and the sardonic Sidney Parker, who seems destined to be Charlotte's main man.

Barrett has turned these raw materials into something designed to appeal to our current sensibilities: a condemnation of gentrification. As Sir Edward strives to impress his aunt by bringing in horse breeders and planning a racetrack, Thomas Parker's visions of "an ideal community" give way to a coarse defilement of the coastline. Even worse, the developers' racetrack plans turn out to be a loose cover for their real business: smuggling tea and spices from shipwrecks off the south coast. The horror! The shame! The unforgivable Darjeelingness of it all!

As Barrett's omniscient narrator decries "these extravagant designs for construction of luxury suites" and "a racing establishment ... in the hands of a London breeder," it's hard not to believe that she's been walking around San Francisco's South of Market district. But would Jane Austen, who delighted in trips to London and Bath, have disliked the development so much? By implicitly turning her into a moralizing har-

py, Barrett has leached away the complexity that gives Austen her bite. Austen was no eco-warrior. Though she might have looked askance at coastal development, she would have derived more amusement from satirizing it than from condemning it outright. (This is the woman who once wrote winkingly from London, “I am once more in this scene of dissipation and vice, and I begin already to find my morals corrupted.”)

In fairness, Barrett’s addition isn’t all bad. There’s a degree of cleverness in the plot twists, one of which requires Sidney to prove

his heroism by rescuing Charlotte’s younger brother from an elaborately framed crime.

But the cleverness backfires, since Barrett’s principal characters get lost amid the plot machinations. Unlike the mysterious “other lady” of the 1975 version, Barrett has, for the most part, failed to imbibe anything of Austen’s lightness and delicacy. Her Charlotte suffers the most, getting barely any good lines — and as any Janeite knows, an Austen heroine with no good lines is about as useful as a bloodhound with a stuffy nose.

Ultimately, this tepid piece does serve one useful function: it reminds us of just how good the real Austen is. But there’s something unutterably depressing about an homage that misses the mark. No doubt Jane Austen would have been mightily amused by all her imitators, including Barrett — but she would have also cautioned them not to risk humiliation by overreaching. Unless, that is, she planned to write about them herself.

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