

THE PLOT THICKENS

Miss Austen Investigates: The Hapless Milliner

By Jessica Bull

Union Square & Co. (2024)

360 pages; paperback, \$18.99

Review by Emma Kantor

Marriage plot meets murder plot in Jessica Bull's diverting debut, kicking off a mystery series that stars a young Jane Austen as an amateur sleuth.

The novel opens in December 1795.

Austen is on her way to attend a ball in Hampshire, where she's eager to

receive a proposal from charming lawyer Tom Lefroy. (Any reader familiar with Austen's biography will know she shouldn't get her hopes up about the Irishman.) But the celebration comes to an abrupt halt after the body of a local milliner is discovered in the linen closet. When the victim's necklace turns up in the possession of Austen's older brother George, who is nonverbal and unable to explain himself, he's arrested for the crimes—both of which are punishable by hanging.

The authorities are content with the easy explanation, leaving it to Austen to hunt for the real culprit. She comes up against a wall of dismissive patriarchal figures, including the magistrate. It seems “the lethargic colossus of English law will not rouse itself to seek justice for an ordinary young woman” (203).

Austen's investigation carries her well outside the bounds of acceptable feminine pursuits as she probes servants, shopkeepers,



pawnbrokers, and tavern owners in hopes of finding answers to exonerate George. So what if her manner is less than ladylike? “I’m trying to catch a murderer, not a husband,” she tells her cousin Eliza (who’s believed to be the model for several of the author’s fictional creations) (167). Every detective needs a trusty sidekick, and Eliza is a supportive one, standing in for Austen’s beloved sister, Cassandra, while she’s away from Steventon. Yet Jane and Cassandra’s sororal bond is no less palpable from a distance, deftly conveyed through intimate and amusing letters.

Bull succeeds in channeling the caustic wit one would expect from a novel that boasts Jane Austen as its heroine. She also sheds light on issues that are less pronounced in Austen’s canon, addressing the decidedly unjust justice system, inadequate mental health services, and the racism embedded in British society.

Here, the fictional Austen’s storytelling strengths—namely, her keen curiosity and imagination—sometimes lead her astray in the search for truth. Like her gothic novel-obsessed heroine, Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, her morbid “flights of fancy” (187) result in frequent misreadings as well as awkward—and very public—accusations. It may be difficult for Austen devotees to believe she could be so, well, “hapless” (217), but even literary geniuses must be permitted to err now and then.

Emma Kantor is a Brooklyn-based writer, comedian, and senior children’s books editor at Publishers Weekly.

REGISTRATION STILL OPEN FOR 2024 AGM

If you haven't yet registered for the 2024 AGM in Cleveland, “Austen, Annotated: Jane Austen’s Literary, Political, and Cultural Origins,” it’s not too late to participate, in person or via the livestream/virtual option. Livestream/virtual AGM tickets can be purchased until October 11. In-person attendee and companion registration is open until September 25. The number of companion tickets has been increased, so if you have a friend or significant other you’d like to share the AGM experience with, now is the time! For more information, visit jasna.org/agms/cleveland2024/welcome.php.

NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

JASNA members are hereby given notice of the Annual General Meeting of the Society to be held October 18-20, 2024, in Cleveland. The primary purpose of the AGM is for members to attend the JASNA Business Meeting or JASNA Canada Business Meeting, at which the slates of nominees will be voted on.