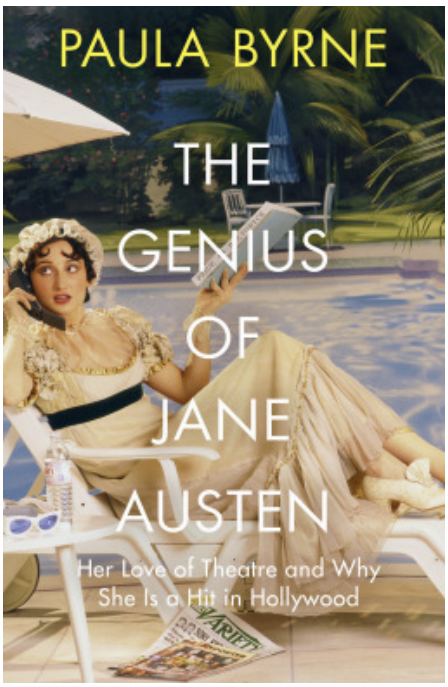

The Genius of Jane Austen: Her Love of Theatre and Why She Works in Hollywood

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The Genius of Jane Austen: Her Love of Theatre and Why She Works in Hollywood Paula Byrne Perfect for fans of Jane Austen, this updated edition of Paula Byrne's debut book includes new material that explores the history of Austen stage adaptations, why her books work so well on screen, and what that reveals about one of the world's most beloved authors.

Originally published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2003 as *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, Paula Byrne's first book was never made widely available in the US and is out of print today. An exploration of Austen's passion for the stage—she acted in amateur productions, frequently attended the theatre, and even scripted several early works in play form—it took a nuanced look at how powerfully her stories were influenced by theatrical comedy.

This updated edition features an introduction and a brand new chapter that delves into the long and lucrative history of Austen adaptations. The film world's love affair with Austen spans decades, from A.A. Milne's "Elizabeth Bennet," performed over the radio in 1944 to raise morale, to this year's *Love and Friendship*. Austen's work has proven so abidingly popular that these movies are more easily identifiable by lead actor than by title: the Emma Thompson *Sense and Sensibility*, the Carey Mulligan *Northanger Abbey*, the Laurence Olivier *Pride and Prejudice.* Byrne even takes a captivating detour into a multitude of successful spin-offs, including the phenomenally brilliant *Clueless.* And along the way, she overturns the notion of Jane Austen as a genteel, prim country mouse, demonstrating that Jane's enduring popularity in film, TV, and theater points to a woman of wild comedy and outrageous behavior.

For lovers of everything Jane Austen, as well as for a new generation discovering her for the first time, *The Genius of Jane Austen* demonstrates why this beloved author still resonates with readers and movie audiences today.

The Genius of Jane Austen: Her Love of Theatre and Why She Works in Hollywood Details

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From Reader Review The Genius of Jane Austen: Her Love of Theatre and Why She Works in Hollywood for online ebook

Jasmin says

I feel like there are aspects of this book that were really well researched, and other parts that were expanded on them just to fill out to word count. Interesting read, just weirdly repetitive in a way that doesn't feel like it's enforcing a point.

Abigail Bok says

This book reads like a dissertation that got expanded (awkwardly) into a book. In most cases I'd be more severe on such efforts, but there's a great deal to value in *The Genius of Jane Austen.*

It starts out intimidatingly enough with a deep dive into eighteenth-century theater, littering the pages with playwrights I'd barely heard of and plays I've never read. But once I found my feet in this unfamiliar landscape, I was delighted with the fresh vistas opened on Jane Austen's writings, from the juvenilia to the novels (well, some of the novels: there's scarcely a word about *Northanger Abbey* or *Persuasion*, and *Emma* gets rather short shrift). The center of the book consists of two long chapters about *Mansfield Park*—no surprise, considering that private theatricals are a key plot element. These were definitely the strongest chapters, and they allowed me to see *MP* in whole new ways.

Earlier in the book, Byrne makes a very good case for how the roots of Austen's art lie in drama, much more than they do in romance or gothic fiction. She shows Austen's evolution in her use of dramatic techniques throughout the writing of the juvenilia and *Lady Susan,* laying a strong groundwork for the later chapters.

The last chapter is an odd and rambling bit on modern film adaptations, and I could have done without it. I agree with her praise of Patricia Rozema's free adaptation of *Mansfield Park*—really more of a riff on the novel than an adaptation per se—but found little to interest me in the rest of her commentary. The dead giveaway for the book's origin as a dissertation is that the text ends at 70-something percent of the ebook, the remainder being bibliography and such.

This is an important work for anyone who is interested in where Austen, a great mimic and spoofer, got some of her inspiration.

Emma Dargue says

Ok non fiction book about how Jane Austen's works translate and contain themes which lend themselves to Television and Film. I found this film quite dry and found the layout quite strange as the author went through each novel of Jane Austen's and the themes contained within them but only went through the various adaptations of the various novels in the last chapter which meant that the author had to chuck quite a lot of information into the final chapter which meant the pacing was off slightly in terms that the beginning and middle were quite slow in pacing and then right at the very sped up really really quickly.

Damaskcat says

I received a free copy of this book from NetGalley.

This is an updated edition of the book first published in 1983. It looks at how Jane Austen loved the theatre and reflected that love in her novels and in her juvenilia. Many critics have assumed that the failed performance of Lovers' Vows in Mansfield Park means that Austen herself disapproved of theatre in all its forms and especially private theatricals but that is actually far from being the case.

Her letters reveal that she visited the theatre whenever she could, took part in private theatricals, and discussed the famous actors of the day with a depth of knowledge which showed she kept up with the latest developments in the theatre. I have always thought that the first two chapters of Pride and Prejudice could be transferred to stage or screen almost without changes. Austen excels at dialogue and many scenes do read like a play.

The author traces theatrical references through all of Austen's work and highlights theatrical elements in many of the scenes. I particularly enjoyed the chapter about the play Lovers' Vows as I wasn't familiar with the play. Knowing more about it adds an extra dimension to Mansfield Park and helps the reader to understand that complex book.

For anyone who loves Austen's work this book is a must read as it really does show how closely related to theatre the novels are and why they adapt so well for the big screen and for television. There are notes on the text and a bibliography as well as an index.

Melissa says

The first two-thirds of Byrne's new edition are excellent overviews of the theatre and playwriting during Austen's lifetime and her opinion of playgoing as reflected in her letters (tl;dr: she liked the theatre and had decided opinions on actors). Byrne starts to fall off in examining the influence of theatre on the novels - two chapters examine Mansfield Park, one each for Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and Emma, and none for Persuasion or Northanger Abbey. There is a nice chapter about Austen adaptations on the big screen (and small) but there isn't a good conclusion to the book.

Kaethe says

Most intriguing and insightful work of literary scholarship I have ever read. I am pleased to see Clueless getting the serious consideration of deserves. And now I want to read the Milne play.

Jaspal Rana says

Jane Austen might just be the most famous (and the most gifted) English writer of the Regency period. She

certainly has held her own in an age where - it is often alleged - social media has taken over the culture of reading books.

Austen's popularity generates its own paradox. People are aware of her and read her, but they do not read her well. (It is telling that many think of her books as precursors to modern chick-lit.) I believe that The Genius of Jane Austen can help us remedy the aforementioned defect to some extent.

It is often argued that Austen disapproved of theatre and stage in general, and Mansfield Park is cited as a proof of her disapproval. Byrne endeavours to show that nothing can be farther from the truth. Austen was well-versed in the theatrical techniques and drama of the day, and her knowledge of theatricality and performance influenced her work greatly. While Mansfield Park emphasizes the role of spectator in the theatre (in the form of its heroine Fanny Price), Sense and Sensibility endorses the illegitimate theatres which were flourishing in eighteenth century London through the hyperbolic performances of Marianne Dashwood. Emma and Pride and Prejudice have their own shares of theatrical/stage allusions and homages.

One of the book's strengths is that Byrne begins with an overview of British stage history. Though only peripherally related to Austen's main body of work, it is crucial to understanding Austen's debt to theatre and drama. After all, the dramatic arts speak to us about the world we live in and about socio-cultural issues that affect our lives. They spoke to Austen as well.

And now, the disappointments.
Byrne is obviously under the (mistaken) impression that she is the first to notice that Austen loved theatre (as evidenced by her frequent use of phrases such as "critics have failed to take into account...", "it has hitherto been unnoticed...", "scholars mistakenly believe..." *et cetera*; seriously, it was off-putting). Sorry Ms. Byrne, you need to tone it down a bit.
The other thing is that the book's subtitle is misleading. Byrne devotes only one chapter - meandering and unsatisfactory, in my opinion - to the film and small screen adaptations of Austen's works, which may bother some people, though I was not affected much.

All in all, it is a fine book, though a better editor could have improved it substantially.

John Plowright says

Paula Byrne's 'The Genius of Jane Austen' is subtitled 'Her Love and Theatre and Why she is a Hit in Hollywood' and represents an expanded edition of her critically acclaimed 2002 book 'Jane Austen and the Theatre' in which the central thesis was that Austen's comic genius was decisively shaped by her love of theatre.

The book charts Austen's interest in drama, originating in private family theatricals (sometimes wholly written by the Austen family), and developing through her attending professional performances in London, Bath and Southampton, before explaining how the theatre influenced Austen's comedic fiction.

This influence is most obvious in relation to the rehearsals of Kotzebue's play 'Lover's Vows' which dominates the first quarter of 'Mansfield Park'. Byrne not only considers this in great detail but combs all of Austen's novels and even her juvenilia to justify her view that Austen was much influenced by drama both thematically and stylistically. This is done convincingly and in the process much light is shed on Austen's texts, as well as helping to overturn the once conventional view, originating with Lionel Trilling, that Austen

was morally opposed to theatrical undertakings.

When Byrne's 'Jane Austen and the Theatre' was first published alongside Penny Gay's book with the same title, that coincidence was attributed by at least one reviewer (John Mullan in 'The Guardian') to " the spate of film and TV adaptations of recent years" which "alert us to the dramatic qualities" of Austen's fiction, whilst reminding us of our ignorance "of the contemporary experience of drama out of which the novels come."

In the fifteen years since that appraisal there's been no let up in the interest in dramatizing Austen and it's therefore fitting that the expansion to Byrne's original volume should consist of the concluding chapter 'Why She Is a Hit in Hollywood', although given that this is only one of eleven chapters its prominence in the new title is somewhat misleading, as is the reference to 'Hollywood', which serves as shorthand for all stage and film adaptations of Austen's novels. Indeed, in Byrne's hands A.A. Milne's 1936 play 'Miss Elizabeth Bennet' justifiably receives more attention that M.G.M.'s 1940 'Pride and Prejudice'.

Byrne's assessment of various Austen-based productions is characteristically shrewd, particularly in explaining why Amy Heckerling's 'Clueless' succeeds much better than Douglas McGrath's 'Emma" (because the former finds a way of treating Emma ironically which is much more in keeping with Austen's intention of portraying "a heroine whom no one but myself will much like").

In short, it is very gratifying indeed that 'Jane Austen and the Theatre' has been expanded and reprinted, to complement the author's equally excellent biography of Austen ('The Real Jane Austen: A Life in Small Things"), in this year marking the bicentenary of Austen's death.

Terry says

If you're just interested in the movie adaptations of Jane Austen's novels, then skip right to the end; the author added a chapter just to cover that. As for the rest of the book, I don't know who Byrne is trying to fool with that picture on the cover of Jane Austen by the pool, but this is straight up academic-paper-masquerading-as-pop-culture-nonfiction, following all the steps of "this is my thesis statement, this is why no one has researched this before, this is why it's important, here are all my examples." It's possible to turn the book into an entertaining read, but the author didn't take the time to structure her research for a different market or use a different tone in writing.

Girl with her Head in a Book says

For my full review: http://girlwithherheadinabook.co.uk/2...

Paula Byrne's The Real Jane Austen: A Life in Small Things was a truly innovative biography in how it told the story of Austen's life through the objects which remain from her life-time. With this book, Byrne is expanding on her earlier book Jane Austen and the Theatre which was first released in 2002. It does rather beg the question whether this re-release and re-brand is little more than an attempt to cash in on the various bicentennials which Miss Austen has been enjoying over the past few years and the fact that she is shortly to star in a very ugly and inaccurate bank note. However, once I started the book, I was so caught up that any misgivings were set aside. Paula Byrne is an incredibly engaging writer and her enthusiasm for her subject is

obvious and engaging. Due to the ill-starred amateur dramatics in Mansfield Park, there has been a long-held tradition that the strait-laced Miss Austen disapproved of the stage, but here Byrne argues not only that this was far from the case but also that Austen's knowledge of and passion for the theatre was in fact at the core of her writing.

On the surface, the question of whether Jane Austen liked watching plays may seem trivial but in piecing together the context in which her novels were written, Byrne helps us towards an entirely fresh understanding of Austen's work. Byrne goes through Austen's correspondence and shows that whenever she had the opportunity, Jane Austen went to the theatre around two or three times a week. Even when she was not able to, she maintained a keen interest in the careers of the celebrity stage performers of the day. She expressed dissatisfaction when one actor who had been a fixture in Bath theatres transferred to London. She wondered whether one particularly emotive player would be too much for her young nieces. At one point she says she felt like swearing when she heard that Sarah Siddons would not be appearing in King John that evening.

It hardly seems convincing that Austen disliked the theatre. Indeed, Byrne even puts forward the controversial theory that Austen's infamous long creative silence while she was living in Bath was less the sign of a depressed mind and more perhaps that she was going out a lot, seeing a lot of plays and maybe just not having the time to sit down and write. Byrne also points out the tradition of Austen family putting on amateur productions in their own home and that even when she got to the grand old age of thirty-five, Austen played Mrs Candour in Richard Sheridan's School for Scandal. Not so disapproving of home dramatics either then.

Indeed, setting aside the Lovers' Vows episode in Mansfield Park, many of the characters express admiration for the theatre. Byrne tracks how in Sense and Sensibility, Willoughby and the Dashwoods read Hamlet together. Emma Woodhouse is hardly literary - her penchant for drawing up reading lists rather than actually going through them is a plot point - but even she can quote from Romeo and Juliet. So clearly, plays are not even always bad within her books. More interestingly, Byrne analyses how certain theatrical traditions are echoed in the characters that Austen has created. Northanger's Catherine Moreland is the stereotypical naive country girl so popular in Regency drama. Pride and Prejudice's Mr Collins is an ignorant hypocrite along the lines of Moliere's Tartuffe. Even Elizabeth is another example of the sprightly heroine which also dominated Regency dramas, able to to defeat the high-ranking aristocrats despite her inferior connections. Byrne explains how in many popular Regency plays, there was the conflict between country and town, with the naive ingenue arriving in London from the country and having all of their illusions shattered. The battle lines are drawn. Pride and Prejudice inverts this since Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy bring the town to the country, with Mrs Bennet loudly defending her territory against the rude incomer. Austen was at heart a satirist, right from the beginning with the burlesques of Love and Freindship and although she sheathed her claws for the majority of her novels, she never quite abandoned her roots.

Particularly compelling was Byrne's analysis of Sense and Sensibility. She points out that the themes of Sheridan's play The Rivals echo the battle between sense and sensibility and in particular 'the errors of an ill-directed imagination', something which also overshadows much of Northanger Abbey. Yet it is also undeniable how many theatrical devices are at play in the action of Sense and Sensibility - Marianne leaps up and believes she sees Willoughby, but no, it is Edward Ferrars. Later she thinks Willoughby will be at the door, but it is Colonel Brandon. Edward expects to find Elinor, but there is Lucy Steele as well. The characters are constantly mistaking people for each other. Later Mrs Jennings and Elinor are at cross purposes over whether a proposal has taken place. The dialogue between Elinor and Lucy Steele is charged with what each of them are not saying - they both know that the other one knows they know they know. There is true absurdity that Edward Ferrars is giving up his inheritance to marry a poor fortune-less girl who

he does not love. All of these are examples of the kind of mis-direction which was a classic feature of Regency comedy and puts the whole novel in a different light. Is it because Austen was such an avid follower of theatre that her dialogue remains quite so fresh?

Still, although an ex-English-literature student, Byrne helped me to see how my own textual ignorance had allowed me to misunderstand much of the action of Mansfield Park. Having had no idea of the significance of the play Lovers' Vows (I had had a vague notion that it was not actually a real play), it seems that I was missing a good deal of crucial context. Indeed, according to Byrne, the novel's first volume 'is only partially intelligible without knowledge of Lovers' Vows'. Small wonder then that it's the book which people tend to like the least. Byrne explains that the play signals 'Austen's engagement with the subject of prohibited relationships and with a long-standing debate about women's autonomy in courtship'. An intriguing choice for a book which sees one woman commit adultery, another elope and another flat out refuse to marry a man she dislikes. Famously, in Northanger Abbey, Austen mocked Samuel Richardson's assumption that no woman should fall in love before the man in question had proposed, so this should not be so surprising, but here something quite different is happening.

Lovers' Vows features a fallen woman (played by Maria Bertram) reunited with her son (played by Henry Crawford) while a vivacious young woman (played by Mary Crawford) propositions her tutor and clergyman (played by Edmund Bertram). The parallels are painfully obvious once you have some idea of the story, but given that most people read Mansfield Park in ignorance of all of this, we are missing out on a lot. Mr Yates plays the wicked Baron, but he too has a parallel when Sir Thomas comes home unexpectedly and the whole production has to cease. Yet there is even more going on here, Byrne explains how the play that Tom Bertram had wanted to pick was one where the apparent heir to an estate is inadequate and a more noble replacement is found. Then when they settle on Lovers' Vows, Tom decides to play the butler. All of this is Austen highlighting Tom's inadequacies and unsuitability to inherit Mansfield Park. Then there is the conflict between how Henry Crawford wants to speak his lines and how Mr Yates wishes to bellow them - this is Austen poking fun at a contemporary debate about new fashions in acting. We have missed all of this but Austen's contemporary readers would have got it all.

The Genius of Jane Austen explains why Austen never really seemed to consider becoming a dramatist herself - her use of the free indirect voice was revolutionary in the way that it took her both inside and outside of her characters but it also gave her far more control over her cast and how they behaved than a playwright or director would have ever had. That this is such a key part of her work is, Byrne postulates, the reason why 'film and television adaptations - brilliantly as they may render the surface of Jane Austen's comic world - can never fully satisfy the serious reader of the novels themselves. Screenwriters find it almost impossible to render the ironic third-person authorial voice that is so important to Austen's narrative method'. This explains why many of us heard the news that ITV plans to put together a new production of Pride and Prejudice with more of a sigh than a cheer.

With varying degrees of enthusiasm, Byrne tracks through the various adaptations which have graced stages and screens both big and small. She notes the boom in Austen-mania since the mid 1990s, but also notes the much earlier depictions such as AA Milne's Elizabeth Bennet and the fluffy and frivolous 1940 MGM production. I did find myself wondering whether Byrne's antipathy for Gwyneth Paltrow as Emma was influenced by Ms Paltrow's current popularity status, but I agreed wholeheartedly that Alicia Silverstone better embodies Emma Woodhouse's mixture of altruism and spoiled self-centredness. Byrne also notes how ubiquitous Austen spin-offs truly are in the modern day, pondering whether there will soon be 'a TV channel entirely devoted to Austen'.

We misunderstand Austen in so very many, many ways. We think of her as a romance novelist, we believe

her family when they say that she preferred to stay at home even though we can see in her letters that she travelled. We believe them when they say that she never had a cross word to say about anyone even though her letters are full of digs at the neighbours and her novels are packed with mockery. Byrne states firmly that this 'twentieth century assumption' that Austen was 'deeply suspicious of urban pleasures' is false - Jane Austen was a clever woman. Byrne's novel is far more academic in its style than The Real Jane Austen but it makes the intelligence behind Austen's work inescapable, despite it being something so long denied even by those close to her - and just in case there was any risk of her point being missed, Byrne has even updated her book's title to make it more clear. Jane Austen. Genius. Read all about it here.

Kathleen Flynn says

I remember, several years ago, tracking down with difficulty the earlier version of this work, "Jane Austen and the Theatre," and reading it admiringly, but slowly. So much was new or only vaguely familiar to me that it took time to process. Reread now -- for pleasure instead of research, and far more conversant with the world of Jane Austen -- the book feels like an old friend.

Byrne begins with a look at the theater in Jane Austen's time, as well at Austen's own experience with play-going and amateur theatricals. She finds in many seemingly obscure references in Austen's letters her deep knowledge of and interest in the notable actors and plays of her era, then looks closely at the influence of drama on four of Austen's six completed novels. ("Northanger Abbey" and "Persuasion" are apparently not playlike enough, but "Lady Susan" and some of the juvenilia get a mention.) A final chapter looks at some of the more notable movie versions and reworkings to emerge in recent decades.

I highly recommend this for anyone who loves Jane Austen's work and is ready for a new and intriguing way of looking at it. As we might expect, it is particularly strong on the less-beloved but truly terrific "Mansfield Park."

Roman Clodia says

Byrne's enthusiasm shines through this but her thesis that Jane Austen was influenced by theatre is broad, unspecific, and hardly as novel as she claims. There's lots of interesting material in the first part which mines an array of primary material to explore the Austen family's engagements with public theatre, private theatricals and dramatised readings aloud. The final chapter, too, on Hollywood's receptions of Austen collects together material on the familiar and less familiar film adaptations.

The section in the middle, though, Byrne's 'readings' of the theatrical aspects of the novels is repetitive, unfocused and frequently states the obvious. Byrne isn't a nuanced literary scholar: she skims the surface, re-tells plots, reiterates what we already know, rather than uncovering new aspects of interpreting the books. There are certainly some interesting intertextual connections being made with theatre, comedy drama and other novels (the later rather undermining the thesis being proposed here) but do they re-open, change or illuminate Austen's novels themselves? No, not really.

The book, overall, seems to be arguing for a premise (that Austen was influenced by theatrical comedy) that

no scholar would realistically doubt. A book, then, that may well delight Austen fans and undergraduates.

Review from an ARC courtesy of NetGalley

Jennifer Abella says

looks at Austen from a perspective I hadn't thought much about. tho I wish it had explored new media adaptations (lizzie bennet diaries, etc.) as well as films. but maybe this is the nudge I needed to read She Stoops to Conquer.

Maggie says

"We saw through his Character...They said he was Sensible, well informed, and Agreeable; we did not pretend to Judge of such trifles, but as we were convinced he had no soul, that he had never read the Sorrows of Werter, & that his Hair bore not the slightest resemblance to Auburn, we were certain that Janetta could feel no affection for him, or at least that she ought to feel none." (MW, 93)

"The contrasts and conflicts arising from clashes between Romantic idealism and prudent conservatism provide the comic dynamic of both Austen's and Sheridan's satire, and - as will be shown later - Austen was to rework this comic device in Sense and Sensibility." (94)

The School for Scandal:
CARELESS: Don't let that old Blockhead persuade you - to squander any of that money on old Musty debts, or any such Nonsense for tradesman - Charles are the most Exorbitant Fellows.
CHARLES: Very true, and paying them is only Encouraging them.

"The same characters and events are seen and judged from a variety of viewpoints; different characters reveal how all actions are open to many layers of interpretation and potential distortion." (106)

"...by the end of the novel it is the sensible sister who makes a romantic marriage and the romantic sister who makes a sensible marriage... The book is consciously structured around a series of ironic oppositions, which work to deflate fixed notions. Having two heroines allows the author's sympathy to be balanced between them as they are played off against one another." (122)

Cowley's Which is the man? "What dy'e think one has relations given one for? To be asham'd of 'em." (155)

Lady Catherine ..."monsters of egotism, selfishness and pride. She has the same contempt for the lower orders as these other fine ladies, and a misplaced love of her own dignity. Though she is obsessed with the minutiae of social decorum, she is also rude and unfeeling." (159)
"whenever any of the cottagers were disposed to be quarrelsome, discontented or too poor, she sallied forth into the village to settle their differences, silence their complaints, and scold them into harmony and plenty" (PP 169)

"Darcy's self-exculpatory letter, however, makes it abundantly clear that the real objection to Elizabeth's family is not their rank, but their behavior..." "She is made aware from this point on that breaches of social

etiquette hold potentially damaging consequences." (160)

Emma:
"Emma denied none of it aloud, and agreed to none of it in private." (119)
"she had the comfort of appearing very polite, while feeling very cross" (E, 119)
"She listened with much inward suffering, but with great outward patience" (E, 409)

"...the contemporary American class system (based on beauty, wealth and celebrity" (263)
"Her lack of self-knowledge and her skewed perspective are made evident from the first two minutes of the film." (263)

Jo-anne Atkinson says

I was not aware that this was an updated version of a precious book but that made no difference as I had not read the original. Themes related to the theatre run through all of Austen's writing and what Byrne does in this book is examine where those influences have come from and how Austen's writings relate to them. In a world of transient media it is easy to forget that the written and performed word were all that families had for entertainment two hundred years ago. I particularly liked the way that Byrne examined each of Austen's works to show progression in terms of writing style alongside the development of theatre in England. The update section looks at TV and film adaptations of Austen's works and Byrne shows how Austen is not that easy to translate to screen.
