



**Seeking Austen, from Abroad:
Lori Smith's Memoir *A Walk with Jane Austen* (2007)
Juliette Wells**

Jane Austen's popularity with present-day audiences around the world is evident from the global enthusiasm for screen adaptations of her novels, many of them set in places and times quite distant from her own; from the international origins of visitors to Jane Austen's House Museum in Chawton and the Jane Austen Centre in Bath; and from the thriving Jane Austen Societies that are now located well beyond the U.K., U.S., and Australia. One distinctive aspect of this wave of popularity is the tendency of Austen fans to generate books derived from and inspired by hers. From sequels to dating guides, mysteries to romances, these varied works of fiction and nonfiction testify to the enduring appeal of Austen's characters and plots – and her life – to the popular imagination.

The impulse to write creatively in response to Austen is not new, of course: consider such sequels as Sybil G. Brinton's *Old Friends and New Fancies* (1913) or D.A. Bonavia-Hunt's *Pemberley Shades* (1949). Nor is the desire to follow in Austen's footsteps unique to present-day readers: witness Constance Hill's travel guide-cum-appreciation, *Jane Austen: Her Homes and Her Friends* (1902). More recently, the bestselling novels *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) by Helen Fielding and *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2004) by Karen Joy Fowler have explored the nature of Austen's pull on contemporary readers, while fictions such as *Me and Mr. Darcy* by Alexandra Potter, *Lost in Austen* by Emma Campbell Webster, *Confessions of a Jane Austen Addict* by Laurie Viera Rigler, and *Austenland* by Shannon Hale – all published in 2007 – have purveyed the fantasy of entering an Austenian world and interacting with her characters. Readers who wish to undertake actual journeys to 'Austen country' are now equipped to do so by a handful of guidebooks, notably Anne-Marie Edwards' much reprinted *In the Steps of Jane Austen: Walking Tours of Austen's England* (1991), Caroline Sanderson's *A Rambling Fancy: In the Footsteps of Jane Austen* (2006), and Katharine Reeve's *Jane Austen in Bath: Walking Tours of the Writer's City* (2006).

The plethora of Austen-derived books, of which I have mentioned only a sample, creates quite a challenge for a writer who wishes to attract notice in this increasingly crowded field. What remains to be said for a popular audience about Austen, her life, her characters, and her readers? Lori Smith's 2007 *A Walk with Jane Austen: A Journey into Adventure, Love & Faith*, published by WaterBrook Press,¹ stakes a claim to new territory through combining memoir, travelogue, and reflection on Austen, with particular attention to the topic of spirituality. Thirty-three years old and the author of a guide for Christian singles (*The Single Truth*, 2002), Smith, to her dismay and disappointment, was not yet married. She traveled to Austen-related locations in the hope, she explains, that 'somehow this proximity to Jane's life will

¹ In the U.K., the memoir was released by Lion Hudson with the somewhat more literal subtitle 'A Modern Woman's Search for Happiness, Fulfilment, and Her Very Own Mr. Darcy.'

help me understand my own'.² Her memoir teases its readers with the possibility of a romantic conclusion for this very appealing-sounding young woman, who endearingly and with considerable humour confesses her enthusiasms, insecurities, and struggles with faith – as well as with an undiagnosed long-term illness.

A Walk with Jane Austen is unique among contemporary Austen-derived texts in several ways, all of which make it valuable to scholars who study the phenomenon of Austen's current popularity. Like the novelists mentioned above, from Fielding through Hale, Smith depicts the appeal of Austen's writings to a young woman at the turn of the millennium who is conversant with Austen-derived films as well as with the original novels – with the crucial difference that Smith is investigating her *own* attraction to Austen rather than that of a fictional, or fictionalized, heroine. Smith's choice of personal narrative allows her to convey directly the reasons she reads Austen and also to testify at length to the rewards of doing so; in contrast, other published accounts by general readers of their enthusiasm for Austen remain brief.³ Smith's tolerant approach to the religious and spiritual aspects of Austen's life and writings distinguishes her from other professed Christians who have rewritten or reframed Austen to make her more palatable to present-day believers. That Smith searches for personal insight rather than morals or guidelines for conduct in Austen's writings separates her as well from those secular writers who have (with varying degrees of seriousness) remade Austen's novels into didactic guides for present-day behavior.⁴

Through its element of travelogue, furthermore, *A Walk with Jane Austen* illuminates in a very personal way both the possibilities and the limitations of literary pilgrimage. As Nicola J. Watson has recently argued from a historical perspective in *The Literary Tourist*, 'traces of literary pilgrimage ... are, however imperfect, indicators and records of that otherwise most elusive of things to pin down, how readers experience and live out their reading ... [and] how literature is consumed, experienced and projected within the individual reader's life, and within a readership more generally.'⁵ Indeed, Smith's account contributes to our understanding of present-day reading practices outside the academy and specifically to the consumption of works considered to be literary classics.

² Lori Smith, *A Walk with Jane Austen: A Journey into Adventure, Love & Faith* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2007) 12; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. Smith's assertion of the rewards of travelling in search of Austen, her meditations on the effects of Austen's novels on contemporary young women, and her book's orientation towards Christian readers are echoed by a novel published too recently to be included in this article: Beth Pattillo's *Jane Austen Ruined My Life* (New York: Guideposts, 2009), in which a young American Austen scholar who has been betrayed in love escapes to England 'to prove that there's no such thing as a happy ending' (xi).

³ *Jane Austen's Regency World*, a magazine published by the Jane Austen Centre in Bath, contains a regular interview feature with a selected Austen fan titled 'Your Jane Austen'. See also the following compilations of views on Austen: *Jane Austen: A Celebration*, ed. Maggie Lane and David Selwyn (Manchester: Fyfield, 2000) and *Jane Austen: Antipodean Views*, ed. Susannah Fullerton and Anne Harbers (Neutral Bay: Wellington Lane Press, 2001).

⁴ See Margaret C. Sullivan, *The Jane Austen Handbook: A Sensible Yet Elegant Guide to Her World* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2007); Josephine Ross, *Jane Austen's Guide to Good Manners: Compliments, Charades, & Horrible Blunders* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006); Patrice Hannon, *Dear Jane Austen: A Heroine's Guide to Life and Love* (2005; New York, Plume, 2007); and Lauren Henderson, *Jane Austen's Guide to Dating* (New York: Hyperion, 2005).

⁵ Nicola J. Watson, *The Literary Tourist* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 8.

The Outer Journey: Tracking Austen

In her 'Introduction,' Smith presents her desire to visit Austen-related locations as having emerged naturally and inevitably as her acquaintance with Austen deepened. Long a lover of the novels, and of the 1995 BBC miniseries version of *Pride and Prejudice*, she states that she began to feel 'after years of reading and rereading ... like I had nowhere left to go' (4). Having turned next to biographies (she cites those of Carol Shields and Claire Tomalin, as well as the memoirs by Henry Austen and James-Edward Austen-Leigh) and to Austen's letters, she found herself 'want[ing] to see the Hampshire countryside,' Bath, Chawton, and the other sites about which she had read (4).

The brevity of Smith's justification of her project suggests that she expects her readers will understand and perhaps even share her impulse to seek Austen via traveling to England. Indeed, the widespread nature of the assumption that the love of an author leads to a desire to track that author's footsteps is evident not only in the Austen-oriented travel guides mentioned in my introduction but in a plethora of new resources aimed at the literary traveller.⁶ Nicola Watson has reminded us, however, that literary tourism is 'a deeply counter-intuitive response to the pleasures and possibilities of imaginative reading.' Watson further contends that the position of such a seeker is 'typically defined and constructed by nostalgic belatedness, and by a constitutive disappointment which turns the reader-tourist back to the text.'⁷

This disappointment is certainly evident, though mostly implicitly, in Smith's account.⁸ While Smith does bemoan the rainy weather that meets her in Bath (and prevents her from dressing as stylishly as she had hoped), she rarely describes herself as let down by an Austen-related site. One exception is her beholding, in Jane Austen's House Museum (formerly known as Chawton Cottage), the famed writing table associated with Austen: 'The table is tiny, small angles all around the top, on a little pedestal, not what I expected, and I thought she wrote in the drawing room and not the dining room' (96).⁹ Characteristically, Smith registers but does not dwell on this gap between expectation and museum-constructed 'reality'.

Indeed, Smith's engaging writing style and her easy movement between personal narrative and Austen anecdotes almost distracts the reader from noticing how comparatively dull her account becomes when she is actually tracking Austen's footsteps, as opposed to writing more reflectively about her own history and her sense of 'kinship' (10) with Austen. Her report of walking around Bath is representative:

⁶ See for instance Shannon McKenna Schmidt and Joni Rendon, *Novel Destinations: Literary Landmarks from Jane Austen's Bath to Ernest Hemingway's Key West* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2008). Caroline Sanderson's *A Rambling Fancy* is one of a series of literary guides from Cadogan; Anne-Marie Edwards, author of *In the Steps of Jane Austen*, has written guides to Hardy and Shakespeare country as well.

⁷ Watson 1, 13.

⁸ Somewhat ironically, the sense of belatedness asserted by Watson afflicts Smith only once, when she visits Lyme Park, the stately home that appeared as Pemberley in Smith's beloved 1995 BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice*. Trying to locate 'significant spots in the movie,' Smith is told that "[a]s it was filmed ten years ago, all of that was taken down" (184).

⁹ For an analysis of this museum's construction of Austen through physical objects associated – often quite distantly – with her, see Claudia Johnson, 'Jane Austen's Relics and the Treasures of the East Room,' *Persuasions* 26 (2008): 217-30.

There are Austen remembrances around every corner. The center square contains the abbey and baths and Pump Room. ... Most of the spots I know from Austen – Laura Place, the Circus, the Royal Crescent, Queen Square, where Edward stayed when he came to town – are all just various shapes of town house assortments. ... Late in the afternoon I walked through Sydney Gardens and right by 4 Sydney Place, where the Austens first lived on coming here. Sydney Place seems luxurious, as does most of Bath to me, but I was too tired to do more than venture into the edge of the park. (164)

In contrast to Smith's expectation that laying eyes on locations associated with Austen, her characters, and her family would reveal more to her about the author, in fact she seems to have found little to spark her imagination in these sites.¹⁰ Smith registers this sense of deflation only by proclaiming midway in her memoir that her 'adventure had become mundane; I was growing weary of stalking Jane' (119).

Only once does Smith describe herself as having been strongly affected by contact with Austen material: when she visits the British Library in hopes of seeing 'Jane's writing desk and a manuscript chapter from *Persuasion*' and leaves 'hardly [able to] walk straight, all tingly and in awe' (121). Yet, significantly, it is not the sight of Austen's 'small script with lines crossed through and words corrected' (121-22) that elicits this reaction. Rather, it is the combined effect of the Library's music and literature displays, ranging from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to a manuscript page of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to a typescript page of Virginia Woolf. 'I felt as though I had walked into a sacred space,' Smith declares, 'and everywhere I turned there was something new to inspire awe' (122). This experience, at last, delivers the sense of intimacy for which Smith had hoped: 'To be so close ... to these manuscripts that they actually touched, that they wrote' (121), she effuses. In this context, of course, Austen is but one of the canonical creators, the possessors of what Smith terms 'genius' (122), offered up to thrill the literary tourist. So, too, Austen is but one of the figures whose 'energy' Smith says she could feel and who lead her to muse that she too wants to 'obey that calling' to create, though she herself is, she says, 'not a genius' and 'would be content simply to do some good work' (122).

That Smith is most satisfied by achieving a sense of closeness to Austen's authorship – to her acts of creation and written words – emerges as well from an earlier episode, in which she visits a descendent of Edward Austen Knight. Smith enjoys seeing, and touching, an item from Edward's Wedgwood dining service, as well as 'the gorgeous family coat of arms' (106). She becomes uncomfortable, however, when confronted by a more intimate object said to be associated with Austen: 'He showed me an elegant dining-room chair that lifted up to reveal a chamber pot underneath and said she probably *did* use that, but I overcame my urge to touch all things Austen' (106).

¹⁰ Caroline Sanderson remarks on a similar reaction to the most famous Austen sites: of Chawton in particular, she comments that 'Jane herself had been curiously absent. Her presence had somehow evaporated with the careful orchestration of her heritage' (*A Rambling Fancy: In the Footsteps of Jane Austen* [London: Cadogan, 2006] 177). In contrast, Sanderson declares that '[i]t was the places that had made little or no attempt to pin down a "heritage" Jane–Godmersham, Lyme Regis, and Steventon – where her words caught light, her characters lived on the page and I felt I knew her a little' (218-19).

Smith's visit to this Austen family descendant occasions, too, some of her comparatively rare comments on what Austen means to American as opposed to English readers. Smith does remark more generally on cultural differences between Americans and the English, though usually not far below the surface of stereotype: she senses that 'people here [in England] find [her] too open' (195), for example, and she draws rather basic contrasts between the England of 'cozy little villages ... [a]nd tea shops' and the America of 'oversized strip malls and chain restaurants' (187). More thought-provokingly, she suggests that those to whom Austen seems more distant are more drawn to her. Sam, the Austen descendant, is happy to show Smith his family treasures, in spite of her worry that it 'would be such an intrusion – the American tourist showing up with all of her questions' (105). He tells Smith, however, that 'he doesn't really know anything about Austen' himself (106). Similarly, Smith recounts that a cabbie in Alton, outside Chawton, greeted her with 'Jane Austen. So you're American, yeah? Always the Americans and the Japanese too, tourists, coming to see Jane Austen stuff. Don't understand it myself' (73). The implication in each case is clear: an interest in Austen, far from naturally resulting from shared nationality or even blood lineage, seems to flourish over geographical and cultural distance.

It would hardly be prudent for the author of a memoir framed around an Austen pilgrimage to intimate, much less declare, that such travels do little to enhance one's perception of intimacy with Austen. Smith leaves it to the reader to notice that she responds not to Austen sites per se but to the personal meanings she ascribes to them. She notes, for instance, that at the end of *Persuasion*, 'everything is sealed on a quiet walk on the gravel path behind the Circus. I would like to find that gravel path' (170). What Smith longs for is obviously not the path itself but the romantic resolution that takes place there. Similarly, when endeavoring with the assistance of a guidebook¹¹ to trace a walking route through Hampshire thought to have been a favorite of Austen's, Smith remarks that she 'doesn't think these are the paths Jane walked, of course. But I imagine this may be the way she felt walking them: gloriously alone, surrounded by the heat and health of nature, with friends waiting at the other end' (95). Again, it is not the actual path that matters to Smith, or the process of retracing it, but rather the act of imagination sparked by it.

The Inner Journey: Understanding Austen via Oneself and Oneself via Austen

For Smith, that act of imagination always includes a dual effort: to better understand both Austen and herself. As I have mentioned, Smith devotes little energy to justifying her interest in visiting Austen-related locations, seeming to take for granted that her readers will share the curiosity. In contrast, she develops at length her motives for undertaking a journey of personal discovery. 'In some ways,' she declares early on, 'this trip is about sorting out the possibilities of my life, working and dreaming to ensure that sans husband and children, I will still somehow be significant. ... I hope that somehow this proximity to Jane's life will help me understand my own' (10-11). Accordingly, Smith is most interested in the aspects of Austen's life and of her characters' experiences that parallel her own. Like the characters of Fowler's *The Jane Austen Book Club*, Smith reads Austen in order to reflect on her own history and

¹¹ Smith identifies this guidebook only in her endnotes as being Edwards' *In the Steps of Jane Austen*.

predicament. Henry Austen ‘reminds me,’ she writes, ‘of my own brother’ (130), while Austen’s death ‘makes me think of my Aunt Ginny’ (147). Simple parallels aside, Smith finds in Austen’s characters a language for talking about herself: writing of her reaction to Jack, a man on whom she has a crush, for instance, she observes that ‘[i]t is as though Elinor and Marianne are at war inside me – the one determined not to think about him (I have no real reason to after all) and the other all smiles and hopes’ (177).

Considered more broadly, this unapologetically personal application of literature is characteristic of contemporary nonacademic readers, especially women. Viewing literature through the lens of one’s own experience and as a means of self-improvement is encouraged by book clubs, including on-air versions such as Oprah Winfrey’s in the U.S., as well as by the discussion guides aimed at book-club readers that publishers include in paperbacks.¹² These self-focused forms of interpretation are quite different, of course, from the analytical and theoretical readings promoted within the academy, and as such tend to make literary critics feel uncomfortable, if not hostile. Scholars who study reading practices urge us to examine those reactions and recognize the extent to which we have contributed to them by our own efforts to professionalize our discipline.¹³

In keeping with her personal application of her reading, Smith occasionally presents Austen’s characters as models of desirable behavior for herself or as cautionary tales. ‘I really need to be more like Elinor,’ she admonishes herself (166), again with respect to her crush on Jack, who she fears will turn out to be similar to the charming but untrustworthy Mr. Elliot in *Persuasion* (155-57). Yet Smith avoids presenting Austen’s novels as a template for romantic happiness or proper conduct, as several recent guides based on Austen’s writings have done.¹⁴ Rather than endeavoring, as do the writers of those guides, to map the mores of Austen’s world onto our own, Smith emphasizes that the bond she feels with Austen’s heroines exists in spite of the profound differences between the circumstances of their lives and hers. ‘I find myself wondering,’ she writes, ‘about my deep connection to Austen’s heroines ... women who couldn’t have professions, who were dependent on marriage or inheritance for their value in life, and who were basically forbidden from expressing their emotions to the men they loved’ (185). In contrast, Smith herself frankly admits to an ambition to be ‘incredibly, unbelievably significant’ (12) as a writer, as well as to her hopes for a rewarding marriage and for motherhood.

Indeed, it is the sense of ‘kinship’ (10) with Austen herself rather than with her characters that Smith most fully develops in this memoir, and from which she claims the greatest comfort. Like many an Austen fan, she proclaims that to her Austen ‘feels

¹² *A Walk with Jane Austen* itself includes such a discussion guide, which encourages readers to think about, among other questions, about whether they themselves ‘would have explored Jane’s life differently’ (234). I have discussed the intersection of self-help culture and Austen in a conference paper, ‘Jane Austen: Agony Aunt.’

¹³ See, most recently, Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008) and Cecilia Konchar Farr and Jaime Harker, eds., *The Oprah Affect: Critical Essays on Oprah’s Book Club* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

¹⁴ See footnote 4.

like a dear friend' (10).¹⁵ Smith doesn't claim that her own identity as an unmarried, chaste, Anglican aspiring writer offers her special insight into who Austen 'really was'. Nor, on the whole, does Smith reinvent or remake Austen in her own image, as have many of the authors of recent novels in which Austen appears as a full-fledged character.¹⁶ Even as Smith emphasizes the similarities between herself and Austen, she takes care to acknowledge the differences as well.

This effect is especially evident in Smith's handling of religion, a central topic in her memoir and one that – given that her presses in both the U.S. and U.K. specialise in Christian publishing – can be presumed to be of great interest to her anticipated audience. Altogether, Smith's relaxed approach to Austen's faith is decidedly different from that of many other professedly Christian authors of recent Austen-related books aimed at Christian readers, who, as I have argued elsewhere, make strenuous and sometimes apologetic efforts to bring Austen's writings in line with present-day evangelical beliefs.¹⁷ In contrast, Smith, as she states early on, is 'curious about [Austen's] faith, which evinces itself in a gentle way in her writing' (11); she is also, as she describes herself, both 'struggling to believe' and to find a spiritual home 'outside the stuffy, often sickly sweet, and sometimes nonintellectual spirituality of the evangelical Christian world' in which she grew up and attended college (15).

Smith is careful not to overstate the overlap between her own understanding of faith and that of Austen. She acknowledges that Austen's writings do not contain 'anything that would hint at any spiritual angst, any struggle to believe or not believe, or even any deep spiritual emotion' (25) – qualities that are all present, often affectingly so, in Smith's memoir. Though she speculates that 'in fundamentals of belief' she and Austen might be 'much the same', she states that she 'recognize[s] that Jane's religious experiences must have been far different' from her own, in part because Austen 'didn't have to deal with the evangelical culture I was raised in – the one in which Christian things are separate from other normal (or as the church sometimes describes them, "worldly") things' (37). Aside from those 'fundamentals of belief', on which Smith does not elaborate, she claims common ground with Austen chiefly on the basis of their appreciation of 'the ridiculousness that the church can bring out, if not encourage, in people' (38). Smith cites Mr. Collins as an example here; earlier, she remarked wryly that 'it's a truth universally acknowledged among single Christian women that single Christian guys beyond a certain age are weird' (31). By appreciating Austen's portrayal of Mr. Collins, Smith distinguishes herself from other writers for Christian audiences who have explained away this satirical

¹⁵ For a discussion of the language of friendship within Austen's works and as applied by her fans, see Mary Ann O'Farrell, 'Jane Austen's Friendship,' *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*, ed. Deidre Lynch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 45-62.

¹⁶ I treat these novels in a forthcoming article, 'Austen's Adventures in American Popular Fiction, 1996-2006.'

¹⁷ See Juliette Wells, 'True Love Waits: Austen and the Christian Romance in the Contemporary U.S.,' *Persuasions On-Line* 28.2 (2008) <http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol28no2/wells.htm>. A recent exception is the so-called 'Insight Edition' of *Pride and Prejudice* published by the Christian press Bethany House, which handles the issue of faith much as Smith does. 'Because we work for Bethany House,' the 'Editors' Note' explains, 'we wanted to pay special attention to the book's quiet but resonant faith themes. Austen does not preach, but in her characters' actions—and in her own words of prayer—we find much to inspire us. And hopefully you will, too' (Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* [Minneapolis, MN: 2007] 7).

depiction of a clergyman, either because they were personally offended by it or feared that their readers might be.¹⁸

Smith's responses to the prayers written by Austen also demonstrate her awareness and acceptance of the distance between Austen's apparent faith, and her language for expressing it, and Smith's own. Having quoted a portion of one of the prayers about the undeservedness of God's blessings, Smith comments that 'I read that and felt terribly insecure. *Oh, dear God, you have given abundant blessings. I do not deserve them, and I cannot help but ask for more.* I am sure this is not what Jane intended, but at the moment I do not feel secure in the whims of God' (101). Returning to the same prayer later in her memoir, Smith senses 'a desperation' in its portrayal of 'a God who may be capricious at times, whose favor may not last' (176). Again, Smith – unlike many other Christian writers on Austen's prayers¹⁹ – offers her interpretation without any claim that this interpretation aligns with Austen's own beliefs or concern that it might not.

Other writers for Christian audiences have apologized for the low profile of religion in Austen's writings or reworked them to meet present-day readers' expectations of spiritually uplifting reading. Smith, in contrast, contends that 'Jane's books are Christian in that there is a solid Christian moral foundation throughout her writing, but they are not Christian books per se by today's definition' (37). Smith does not elaborate on what that definition is, presumably out of a sense that the readers of books published by Christian presses do not need this spelled out for them. Indeed, Smith makes the case for only one explicitly Christian aspect of Austen's writing – 'an awareness and remembrance ... of that other world that is a focus of Christianity' (144) – which Smith locates not in Austen's novels but in her letters.

Smith achieves her own most transcendent moments of spiritual certainty in this memoir not by reflecting on Austen's faith or the prayers written by her but instead through the experience of Anglican worship.²⁰ Attending Evensong service at in Oxford's Christ Church Cathedral and hearing the choir sing Psalm 27 – 'The Lord is my light and my salvation' – Smith responds directly to the text and music, with no pause for a thought about whether Austen might have heard a comparable setting or what Anglican worship might have meant in her day. 'Yes, my heart responded,' Smith writes; 'Yes' (202).

Smith does find comfort, however, in recognizing a parallel between her experience and Austen's in an area related to religious belief: the practice of chastity. 'My bed is always empty,' Smith writes of her commitment for reasons of faith to sexual abstinence.²¹ 'It is one of the things about my life that seems ridiculous in the twenty-first century that would not have seemed so to Jane' (181). Nor, accordingly, does Austen's own lack of sexual experience seem ridiculous or unfortunate to Smith – as it evidently has to many a writer of Austen-inspired novels, who have provided

¹⁸ See Wells, 'True Love Waits.'

¹⁹ See Wells, 'True Love Waits.'

²⁰ Smith mentions on her blog, though not in the memoir proper, that she has 'recently found a home in the Anglican church' 8 Nov. 2005 <http://www.followingausten.com>.

²¹ Smith discusses her commitment to chastity more fully in her earlier book, *The Single Truth*, where she also suggests that concentrating on Mr. Darcy, at least the version incarnated on screen by Colin Firth, aids in keeping her vow (*The Single Truth: Challenging the Misconceptions of Singleness with God's Consuming Truth* [Shippensburg, PA: Treasure House, 2002] 144).

fictional versions of the author with passionate kisses and even trysts.²² Given that Smith herself differentiates firmly between love and its physical expression, she has no difficulty in extending the same courtesy to Austen.

One of the functions of *A Walk with Jane Austen* is to record a love story for Smith herself, albeit one that ends unhappily. As she confesses, she is 'afraid that people will look back on my own scant love life someday and assume that nothing ever happened, that my heart was never touched. And I wonder if my life will turn out more like Jane's life or like the heroines' lives in her books' (53). Smith indulges early on in a fantasy of the latter outcome: 'because I'm an Austen devotee following in her steps, perhaps she will deign to craft a little romantic comedy of my own, in real life, from beyond the grave (which seems absolutely ridiculous on paper, but there it is)' (8). The progress of Smith's crush on Jack does contribute some suspense and structure to her narrative. A much more compelling resolution to her memoir comes, however, a year after her Austen trip, when she receives a diagnosis of Lyme disease, thereby giving her 'a name' (213) for years of exhaustion and illness, as well as hope for recovery.

Though Smith vows in the last line of her memoir that she 'will try again' (218) to find romantic love, she declares that she has discovered she does not need it. 'I feel incredibly blessed to be in such a family, with dear friends, with the prospect of work that I love, living a small life surrounded by small goodnesses with this tremendous grace' (217). Smith credits Austen for this lesson in contentment, with respect not only to love but to professional ambition. Austen, Smith declares,

did not want to be famous. ... She enjoyed making money with her writing ... [but] never believed that being big was important. These are the things I want for myself. ... God does not love me because of anything I can do; this still astonishes me. He simply loves me. ... [T]his life – this loving your family and friends and doing good work and telling good stories life – may feel small, but it is far from ordinary. It is the best life, the extraordinary life. It was Jane's, and I hope it will be mine. (217)

Envisioning an Austen who was satisfied with her life, in other words, helps Smith feel satisfied with her own.²³

As is the case throughout her memoir, Smith derives this insight by contemplating Austen's choices and attitudes, not by imagining Austen addressing her directly or intervening, God-like, in her own life. What Smith offers her readers, then, is a model for discovery: each of us, she implies, can come to know ourselves better through reflecting on our interest in and sense of connection to Austen – or indeed any author whose works we cherish.

Conclusion

²² See Wells, 'Austen's Adventures.'

²³ Characteristically, too, Smith separates the way she imagines Austen felt about fame and her sense that God loves her, Lori Smith, regardless of what she achieves. In contrast, Nancy Moser's biographical novel *Just Jane*, published by the Christian press Bethany House, concludes with Cassandra Austen assuring Jane that her writing 'is who you are. ... God has a plan for each of us, Jane, a unique purpose. ... [N]ow you need to find your own contentment in being just Jane' (*Just Jane: A Novel of Jane Austen's Life* [Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2007] 351).

‘Your classic author,’ according to Italo Calvino, ‘is the one you cannot feel indifferent to, who helps you define yourself in relation to him, even in dispute with him.’²⁴ Smith is hardly alone, of course, either in having chosen to ‘define [her]self in relation to’ Jane Austen or in asserting the advantages for contemporary women of deepening their acquaintance with this author’s life and works. Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), for example, made a much bolder claim on behalf of Austen’s power to illuminate women’s choices and circumstances across profound differences of culture and geography. In promoting the benefits of personal encounters with literary classics, too, Smith joins a populous company of prominent book-club leaders, librarians, journalists, and scholars, who collectively equip today’s nonacademic readers with selections, recommendations, and approachable introductions to literary works past and present.²⁵ Those who would like to expand their understanding of literature can take instruction from such popular scholars as Harold Bloom and James Wood, both of whom demonstrate accessible methods of literary criticism for what Bloom has called the ‘solitary’ and Wood the ‘common’ reader.²⁶

What sets Smith apart from these advocates is, first, that her only qualification for writing about Austen is her own love of this author. She has no scholarly training, professional credentials, or celebrity, and the research she undertakes through reading and visiting Austen-related sites is purely self-directed. Moreover, Smith neither simply makes claims about the rewards of encountering Austen nor trains her audience in her own mode of inquiry. Rather, she uses the genre of personal narrative to trace, movingly and at length, her evolution from enjoying Austen’s writings, and the films derived from them, to achieving greater self-knowledge through identifying with Austen as a fellow Christian, writer, and single woman.

Accordingly, Smith contributes not to the scholarly tradition of writing on Austen but instead to the growing body of writings that bear witness to popular readers’ fascination with Austen. As lovers of Austen continue to enact creatively their appreciation of her, we can expect to welcome more personal testimonies to this author’s enduring relevance and significance outside the academy – more ‘walks with Jane Austen’, undertaken by readers around the globe.

²⁴ Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature*, trans. Patrick Creagh (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986) 130.

²⁵ See, for example, Nancy Pearl’s *Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason* (Seattle, WA: Sasquatch, 2003) and Michael Dirda’s *Classics for Pleasure* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2007), in which he contends that ‘great books speak to us of our own very real feelings and failings, of our own all-too-human daydreams and confusions’ (3).

²⁶ Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000) 21; James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (New York: Farrar, Strous and Giroux, 2008) xv. See also Bloom’s *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (New York: Warner, 2002), which notoriously admits Austen as one of very few women authors.