



Jane Austen: A Life

Claire Tomalin

Download now

Read Online ➔

Jane Austen: A Life

Claire Tomalin

Jane Austen: A Life Claire Tomalin

At her death in 1817, Jane Austen left the world six of the most beloved novels written in English—but her shortsighted family destroyed the bulk of her letters; and if she kept any diaries, they did not survive her. Now acclaimed biographer Claire Tomalin has filled the gaps in the record, creating a remarkably fresh and convincing portrait of the woman and the writer.

While most Austen biographers have accepted the assertion of Jane's brother Henry that "My dear Sister's life was not a life of events," Tomalin shows that, on the contrary, Austen's brief life was fraught with upheaval. Tomalin provides detailed and absorbing accounts of Austen's ill-fated love for a young Irishman, her frequent travels and extended visits to London, her close friendship with a worldly cousin whose French husband met his death on the guillotine, her brothers' naval service in the Napoleonic wars and in the colonies, and thus shatters the myth of Jane Austen as a sheltered and homebound spinster whose knowledge of the world was limited to the view from a Hampshire village.

Jane Austen: A Life Details

Date : Published April 27th 1999 by Vintage (first published 1997)

ISBN : 9780679766766

Author : Claire Tomalin

Format : Paperback 341 pages

Genre : Biography, Nonfiction, History

 [Download Jane Austen: A Life ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Jane Austen: A Life ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Jane Austen: A Life Claire Tomalin

From Reader Review Jane Austen: A Life for online ebook

Siria says

Tomalin has produced a very readable biography of Jane Austen. While the source material Tomalin has to work with is limited—her sister Cassandra unfortunately destroyed many of Jane's letters after her death—she is a sensitive interpreter of what does survive. She is good at correcting the traditional image of Austen as a somewhat prim, retiring, romantic old maid, replacing that with the kind of woman we see reflected in her surviving letters: independent, self-assured, extroverted, and flawed.

Laura says

Generally regarded as one of the best biographies, it focuses heavily on Jane's family, connections, and time period. Not as quick and easy a read as the Penguin biography, but lots of well-written information without too much dubious psycho-analyzing (always a danger because although we have many of Jane's letters, we don't have them all, nor do we have opportunity for a Q&A session, nor are our social/family/child-rearing views and expectations necessarily the same as hers). Great details on Jane's extended family, who were quite a collection of characters.

Girl with her Head in a Book says

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

Claire Tomalin has rather cornered the market recently when it comes to literary biography but this is actually the first one of hers that I have ever sat down to read – it turns out that I should have got to it sooner – the woman behind all of the Austen mania is constructed here far more vividly than I have ever seen her before. This is not to denigrate previous biographies but merely to applaud what Tomalin has achieved, to shine a light on an author who has always managed to hide behind the mania, who has remained private, unknowable. Unlike Dickens who basked in the spotlight or the Brontes who had a cluster of sycophants around to mythologise, Jane Austen managed to fly below the radar. With a host of tight-lipped and highly respectable family members keeping schtum and a personal no-nonsense approach to attention-seeking, the question of who Jane Austen really was has persisted down the centuries meaning that the appetite for biographies remains as fierce as ever. With this though, I can't help the feeling that Tomalin has managed to capture something of the real woman ...

Carol Dobson says

Interesting and well written. I always enjoy Tomalin.

Judy says

My biography kick continued with this one about Jane Austen, by the same author of the Charles Dickens biography that was also excellent.

Thank goodness our greats of several hundred years ago didn't have email, or we would not have had the copious letters and diaries that were usually kept by people who had education. This is how we know so much about Austen's life, her travels, her feelings, and her astute observations. And this despite her sister and one of her nieces having destroyed hundreds of her letters!

The Jane Austen of this biography shows us clearly how much of Jane was also part Elizabeth Bennett, how her mother's hydrochondria led to the comic excesses of Mrs. Bennett, and how the inflexible social norms of the late 1700's-early 1800's in England led to such fierce competition for men.

Jane's own disappointments in love (she never married) as well as her very long wait for authorial success add to the poignancy of the book, but her numerous siblings and their lives add context and interest as well. You'll come away from this book with renewed appreciation for who this remarkable woman really was.

Susan says

Truth be told, there is not enough known about Jane Austen's life for a 400+ page biography, and a third or more of the text focuses on her family, relatives, and neighbors. So, why read this biography instead of the memoirs written by family members and her letters, since most of the information available comes from those sources?

Actually it turns out that to better understand Ms Austen and her social milieu, it's very helpful to have a thorough introduction to her family, relatives and neighbors. The book includes the results of research into bank, legal and other records, a family tree, numerous illustrations, and a wonderful map showing the neighbors/neighborhood of Stevenson where she grew up.

The author is thorough and creative, and the book is well written, but warning—the section on Ms Austen's childhood includes so much speculation that it could be labeled "fiction". I thought the book was best on her later years, but even there, the reader who is interested in evaluating evidence for themselves may reasonably come to different conclusions in some cases.

Kate McLachlan says

Okay, I already knew that Jane Austen was going to die at the end of this book, but I still cried. That night, I lay in bed thinking about her life and her death, and I cried again. I loved this story of her life.

Sometime about 30 years ago when I was first enthralled with Jane Austen, I read a biography of her life. For some reason, I never felt the need to read another one because I thought I already knew all about her. As I've grown older, though, I've learned to read her books differently. I've read each one many times, and I still get something new out of them every time. Finally, during a recent re-read, I realized that the Jane Austen who

wrote these books COULD NOT be the same Jane Austen I was remembering from that long-ago biography. So I read this one, and I'm so glad I did.

Jane Austen was not the prim missish maiden aunt that the early biography (wish I could remember which it was!) depicts. She had a sharp tongue and nasty thoughts about people. I love that! It appears that a lot of people didn't even like her! She was too judgmental of others and waspish about it.

Thanks to Claire Tomalin for pointing out the truth about Jane!

Diana says

This was one of the best literary biographies I've read in a long, long time. Written with the "voice" of Jane Austen's own cadence, almost as if one was reading a Jane Austen novel, Tomalin's painstaking research brought Jane to life in a way that no other biography of Jane has for me. I was drawn in from the first chapter, and by 1/3 of the way through, I was so into the book that I even took it with me as I stood in line to vote in November 2004 (a process that year that had me standing in line for almost 2 hours). I'm sure my fellow voters-to-be wondered about the weird lady, chuckling to herself as she read some book - I was reading some sarcastically witty comments written by Jane herself to her sister about a neighbor. Jane could be caustic in her private letters. By the time I got to the chapter on her death, I had become so much a part of the world Tomalin had drawn that I felt a deep sense of loss at reading the letter from Cassandra (Jane's sister) to her brother telling him about Jane's death. I felt like a friend who'd received the sad news - I found myself crying, even though I knew how it would end.

This is how biographies should be written!

Alex says

A brilliant account of the human being behind the name, this book seems at times written by Jane herself. It is constructed as a story, weaving facts together in a way that removes any anxiety that may be caused by a biography replete with dates and statistics and numbers which render the reading act rather psychedelic.

I was rather fortunate and blessed to spend one month at Chawton Great House, known today as Chawton House Library, and to visit Chawton Cottage (The Jane Austen House Museum) and walk around the same places that Jane Austen herself did, across both fields leading to Farringdon, into the small town of Alton and the village of Chawton itself. From a concept, she has become more of a person to me than I could have ever imagined, and with Claire Tomalin's book this transformation has only been accentuated.

After such a read and such an experience, one can only hope to do justice in relating facts, details, and knowledge obtained, to Jane Austen as a person, literary genius ahead of her time, and to the places she has touched by simply existing.

Five stars do not even begin to portray the real value of this book but these, together with a warm recommendation of it to all acquaintances and friends, will hopefully make some small difference in getting it the appreciation it deserves.

Kim says

I purchased and first read this book in Bath in 1999, after visiting Chawton (where Austen lived in the latter part of her life and wrote her last three novels) and Salisbury (where she died and was buried). After that albeit rather limited literary pilgrimage, it seemed appropriate to acquire and read a biography of the writer while I was still in what had been her environment. Although I have re-read Austen's novels in the intervening years, I have not looked at the biography again. This weekend, I re-read it in two sittings. It was good to become reacquainted with Austen and her family, to become lost in the complexity of her extended family relationships and to immerse myself in the influences on her writing.

In *The Uncommon Reader*, Alan Bennett has his central character - the Queen - conclude that authors "were probably best met within the pages of their novels, and were as much creatures of the reader's imagination as the characters in their books". I agree with this sentiment in general terms. While I love Austen's work, I am less keen on the industry which has grown up around it and around her. The prequels, the sequels, the re-imaginings, the films, the television adaptations: while some of them have undoubted merit, all pale in comparison with the wit and intelligence of her prose. It is in her novels that Austen's genius is most apparent and it is in her novels that the reader can really come to know her.

However, while I don't believe that a reader needs to know a lot about a writer's life, sometimes a well-written biography can give insight and add to an appreciation of the writer's work. This is one of those biographies. It is easy to read, not overly academic and contains excellent notes. That said, I skimmed some of it this time around. Biographical material concerning Jane Austen is not extensive (her relatives having destroyed most of her letters after her death), and Tomalin possibly writes a little too much about neighbours and acquaintances about whom more is known. However, this is not a major flaw: it's very interesting on a first reading, but less so on a re-read. Given the lack of biographical material, Tomalin mercifully strays into "she must have thought", "she must have said" territory relatively infrequently. When she does so, her speculation appears reasonable.

Possibly the best thing I can say about Tomalin's writing is that I was moved to tears on two occasions. First, as she describes the joy Austen felt when *Sense and Sensibility* and then *Pride and Prejudice* were published. Then when she describes the period leading up to Austen's death and the death itself. Inspiring tears of joy and tears of sadness in the same work is not a bad indicator of a biographer's skill.

Recommended to any reader who loves Austen's novels and wants to know more about the writer.

Diane says

A must-read for any Jane Austen fan.

Abigail Bok says

Conventional wisdom has it that Claire Tomalin's biography of Jane Austen is the best out there. I would

have to say that it depends on what you're looking for in a biography.

Jane Austen is a bit of a tough subject. Unlike her contemporaries, Frances Burney and Mme de Staël, she did nothing in her life that would have attracted a historian's notice, so the source material is all personal—her letters (heavily redacted by her sister) and the memories of her family (scrubbed of anything discomfiting during the course of the nineteenth century). When I was a student, there was little other than the texts of her novels to take you beyond those limits. After my academic years a series of biographies went further, and Tomalin's is one of them. She has done a lot of digging into the papers, mostly unpublished, of Austen's relatives, neighbors, and friends, and provides a much richer personal history than had previously been possible.

Her text is engaging and accessible, with little of the scholarly labor behind the work on view to the casual reader. She paints a vivid portrait of life in the Austen household, and throughout the book her strength lies in taking the reader into Austen's quotidian experience. Her account of Austen's childhood experiences was the liveliest, but also the most speculative, section and I did feel there was a tendency (all too common among biographers) to psychologize based on insufficient data.

Where the book felt thin to me was in the area of situating Austen's work in her literary and cultural context. There are some passages of this sort, but they feel perfunctory. No worries; other authors have done a good job in this area, but the lack kept me from considering this the ultimate biography.

Nadine Keels says

Brava to the biographer--no doubt this was a challenging account to put together, especially in light of so many of Jane Austen's letters being destroyed. As an Austen fan, I could have read on for a few more chapters. What was it like for her to have to wait so long to see her novels published (let alone the ones that weren't published until after she died)? Like author J.E. Keels says, you really have to believe in your work.

Eric says

Fragmentary records make for suggestive biography. Tomalin must delve archives as a detective, stretch and scrutinize the old paper, and compensate for gaps in the lone life with a narrative of the familial-social surround in which the maturing writer is presumed--and occasionally observed--to lurk and flash. "From what we know of this or that it may be supposed that Jane thought this or that." Tomalin's speculations seem just and her account of the surround is interesting, Olenska-like Cousin Eliza echoing with particular poignance. In the documentary gaps, Austen--ripening genius--reads as appropriately mysterious. Drafts of all novels but *Persuasion* lost and many letters censoriously scissored, or burned, Austen's rag-and-bone shop remains mostly hidden; hers is a life in art.

Pushkin, though he did not know it, chiseled a tribute to Austen in the last of the *Tales of Belkin*:

Those of my readers who have never lived in rural parts cannot imagine how delightful these provincial young ladies are! Brought up on fresh air, in the shade of their apple orchards, they draw their knowledge of life and the world from books. Solitude, freedom, and reading are quick to develop emotions in them unknown to our light-minded beauties. For a country miss, the jingle of a coach bell is an adventure, a trip

to their nearest town marks a stage in life, and a guest's visit leaves a lingering, even permanent memory. Of course, anyone is at liberty to laugh at some of their oddities, but the gibes of a superficial observer cannot efface their essential virtues, of which the chief is: distinction of character, originality (individualité), without which, in the opinion of Jean Paul, human greatness cannot exist. In the capital cities women receive a better education, perhaps, but the ways of society iron out their character and render their minds as indistinguishable as their hats. The above is not meant as a judgement, nor yet a censure, however, nota nostra manet, as one ancient commentator puts it.

Lynn says

She treats Jane Austen's life like a mystery. Digs for evidence where others have not looked. Great read. I use it as a reference book now.

Andrea Hickman Walker says

This is the best biography of Austen that I've read, to date. All the facts are presented clearly, with the usual amount of speculation and guesswork, given that we know so very little. This was fascinating, depressing and inspiring all at once. I found that the majority of the speculation was based in reality and, most importantly, it was based on research of the period in question. The way things were done during the Georgian and Regency periods contrast rather sharply with the following Victorian era, particularly in the area of 'refinement'. Austen comes alive in this book, as does most of the family. More time is discussing the information that we do have, than lamenting the lost letters, etc.

I thoroughly recommend this to anyone interested in Austen or her work.

Julie says

I'm too picky by half, it would seem, when it comes to Austen. I had read this about 4 months ago, and it so impressed me that it took 4 months to comment on it. (!?) Make what you will of that. Tomalin is not the greatest of story tellers, and when you're writing "A Life" of someone, for goodness sake, make sure you have a few interesting stories to tell. How can you be boring when you write of Jane Austen? Somehow, Tomalin has managed that, her scholarly efforts notwithstanding.

Emma Flanagan says

Modern authors leave a wealth of information about themselves behind them. Between interviews and twitter we know a great deal about them. In contrast we don't even have a proper picture of Jane Austen, and many of her letters were destroyed, either by Austen herself or by her family after her death. She is not unusual in this respect. We know Dicken's destroyed many of his letters and other personal papers, and his family were

equally thorough in destroying any potentially compromising letters after his death. Any biographer therefore hasn't exactly got a lot to work with when trying to piece together a picture of who Jane Austen really was. Her family wrote down some biographical information after her death, but by their account Austen was a quiet, rather prim middle aged woman, a maiden aunt who lived to be useful to her family, who's life as they claimed "Of events her life was singularly barren". How then did this woman create characters full of wit, vivacity and spirit. From where did Emma Woodhouse or Elizabeth Bennet spring?

This is what Tomalin tries to answer. Casting aside the image presented by the Austen family Tomalin manages to weave together whatever she could glean from those of Austen's letters to survive the purging, and the various letters, diaries and other papers which her siblings and extended family left behind to create a picture of Jane Austen the person. Undoubtedly much of it is speculation and hypothesis, but it all seems entirely plausible.

I love Tomalin's style. I first came across her when I read *The Invisible Woman* last year, a biography about Dicken's mistress Nelly Ternan. (Another mysterious woman about whom little material remains). That Tomalin was the author, was certainly a factor in my choosing this biography of all the books about Austen that exist. It is not just her ability to make something out of so little but her overall style. For all that much of what she says is speculation it is clearly well researched. The book is also well paced, slowly unfolding to present us with an idea of who Jane Austen was, and how she became the genius she did, yet never dragging. Tomalin pauses just long enough on those events which are significant and skims over those which are not.

There will undoubtedly be those who find fault with this book. Tomalin does not just focus on Jane Austen, but her entire family, which may bother those who would rather hear only about Austen herself. Personally it didn't bother me. For one to understand a person we must also understand the world in which they live and those who shaped them, their family and friends. Secondly many of Austen's family lived extremely interesting lives. One brother was in the Militia, two were in Navy and as Tomalin herself observed, her cousin Eliza's life was like something out of a novel. Additionally while Austen's own stories are in no way autobiographical, events in her own life and that of her family must have influenced her writing in some respects. One can't help noting that where her main male characters have occupations they tend to be those of her brothers - clergymen, soldiers, sailors. Yes one could say there were few employment options in the late 18th to early 19th century for the sons of the upper and middle classes but there are no lawyers, doctors and merchants among the main male characters just as there are none of her brothers were employed as such. Family too is a strong theme in her books, in particular sibling relationships. Austen was extremely close of course to Cassandra but also to her brothers, something which must have shaped her characters sibling relationships. All in all I don't begrudge the inclusion of Austen's siblings in her biography.

For Austen fans I can't recommend this biography highly enough. What's more for a biography on any writer Tomalin will be my first port of call.

Jennifer says

the short take: okay, so i found this book really clunky. the information was interesting and painted quite the picture of life during austen's time but it really took a lot of tangents. it's not so much austen's life as it is her family's life (though of course jane features more). and that's fine...but not what i expected nor what i was hoping for. i have come to understand that biographical information about austen is limited and very few letters she wrote survived. a brother and nephew each produced a biography of jane...so i am curious about them though given her penchant for privacy, i am certain they would not be such wide-ranging and

voyeuristic in nature as the biographies produced in our current day and age. i do feel as though i learned about austen...but i want to know more. i am going to get a copy of Jane Austen: A Life by Carol Shields and hope it to be a better biography.

i felt, too, that tomalin inserted herself too often and made suppositions and statements that were based on imaginings...not fact. so those moments were really odd for me. it's very clear tomalin is a huge austen fan...but that love or bias seemed to seep into this text.

Margaret says

My outstanding impression of the book is how amazingly detailed it is given the fact that few records of her life have survived. Claire Tomalin admits that it was not an easy story to investigate, but explained that Jane Austen wrote no autobiographical notes and if she kept any diaries they did not survive her. Most of her letters to her sister Cassandra were destroyed by Cassandra and a niece destroyed those she had written to one of her brothers. However, 160 letters remain and there is a biographical note of just a few pages written by her brother, Henry after her death. He explained that her life was not by any means a life of event. But as Tomalin discovered her life was full of events, of distress and even trauma, which left marks upon her as permanent as any blacking factory. [return][return]As I d previously read Carol Shields s biography of Austen I already knew the outline of her life, that she was considered rather unrefined by her relatives and of her love for Tom Lefroy who eventually married an heiress.[return][return]Reading this book has enhanced my reading of her fiction, setting them in the context of her world. Jane Austen was not remote from the events of her day, with brothers in the navy, and England at war with France. Tomalin is a relatively objective biographer although every now and then she voices opinions based on her impressions, such as this one concerning Jane s lack of vanity and efforts to be concerned with fashion and dress design:[return][return] In her letters she may comment on the fact that ladies are wearing fruit on their hats, and that it seems more natural to have flowers growing out of the head, and be precise about the colour she requires for dress material; but the impression we get is that, had she lived two hundred years later, she would have rejoiced in the freedom of an old pair of trousers, with a tweed skirt for church, and one decent dress kept for evening. (pages 112 - 113)[return][return]But mainly she sticks to the facts, gleaned from the documentary material and concludes that Jane Austen[return][return] & is as elusive as a cloud in the night sky.[return][return] She has a way of sending biographers away feeling that as Lord David Cecil put it, she remains as no doubt she would have wished - not an intimate but an acquaintance. Her sharpness and refusal to suffer fools, makes you fearful of intruding, misinterpreting, crassly misreading the evidence. (page 285)[return][return]I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and particularly liked the quotations from Austen s letters and the details about her family and friends.
