



[Home](#) > Cassandra's Sister

Cassandra's Sister

Books Reviewed:

[Cassandra's Sister](#) [1]

Issue:

[162](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Geoff Fox](#) [3]

Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

We begin with the tumbrel and a vomiting prisoner kneeling beneath the guillotine; but turn the page to find ourselves in the stock-scented evening garden of the Rectory at Steventon, walking with the 18-year-old Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra. From this point, like her heroine, Veronica Bennett shrewdly decides that 'three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on' with an occasional excursion to Bath or London. The known biographical details of Jane's life and feelings leave considerable space for invention, an opportunity which has been convincingly exploited. Ms Bennett makes much of Jane's encounter with the Irishman, Thomas Lefroy, finding in their brief meetings the love of an unfulfilled life.

The ghosts of Darcy, Mr Collins and Frank Churchill mingle here with the models from whom they might have been partially drawn. There is a sense of a strong if thwarted passion in Jane herself - a suggestion that in her life, if not in her books, she defied Charlotte Brontë's famous judgement that 'the Passions are perfectly unknown to her'. Absolutely unfairly - and I mean this as a compliment - I found myself reading as if this book were somehow an addition to the Austen canon, not least because of its scale and the focus on the emotional fortunes of Jane and Cassandra. It may be harsh to wonder if the dialogue is implausibly mannered at times; and the Jane we meet in these pages does not quite seem capable of the submerged irony which informs the novels. However, her relationships, especially with her sister, and the rhythms and dimensions of her life are engagingly evoked. The book might perhaps serve as an introduction to Jane Austen's writing, but it will certainly enhance the pleasure of those already attracted to the novels themselves.

Running Order:

64

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[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/cassandras-sister>

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[3] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/geoff-fox>