male co-worker's word that gender had nothing to do with Ivins's troubles at the *Times*? Women had just brought a landmark class-action discrimination suit against the paper and won, yet Minutaglio and Smith quote none of them. Was Ivins's problem simply that, super self-confident, she didn't spend enough time "playing politics," as Minutaglio and Smith imply? What exactly would "playing politics" have looked like? After all, it's not partisanship in itself to which advertisers object. FOX News, headed by the Republican operative Roger Ailes, has plenty of advertising. But, as *Ad Age* once put it, "The problem with being associated as liberal is that [liberals] wouldn't be going in a direction that advertisers are really interested in." [see www.fair.org/index.php?page=2595])

One can only imagine what Ivins would be doing today. Had she started an online newspaper, I'd have subscribed. As for keeping Obama honest in 140 characters or fewer? Ivins was a master of the stinger-tweet before Twitter ever existed.

Ultimately, you're setting yourself up for failure by writing book with the name "Molly Ivins" on the cover *if you're not Molly Ivins*. Like a text about ice cream, chocolate, or sex, *A Rebel Life* leaves you ravenous for the real thing. Barring that, the field remains open for a truly great biography. Women? Get out your pens.

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Branding Jane

Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World

By Claire Harman

New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2010, 304 pp., $25.00, hardcover

Reviewed by Audrey Bilger

At a crisis point in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), after the young Lydia Bennet has run off with Wickham, and her family fears for her safety and virtue, her sanctimonious sister Mary draws moral instruction from the incident. A woman's reputation, Mary tells her older sister Elizabeth, the novel's protagonist, "is no less brittle than it is beautiful…[O]ne false step involves her in endless ruin." Dramatic tension arises in the novel from the Bennets' anxiety over Lydia's fate. Her fall would damage not only her reputation but also that of the entire family, forestalling the happy ending Elizabeth so richly deserves. Since Austen's plots are well-known even to those who have not read her books, it's hardly a spoiler to report that everything works out exceptionally well. Lydia is saved from disaster, and Elizabeth lives on as one of literary history's most-beloved heroines.

Reputation in all its brittleness and beauty is Claire Harman's theme in *Jane's Fame*. Although Harman established her own reputation as a biographer with highly regarded books on the authors Sylvia Townsend Warner, Frances Burney, and Robert Louis Stevenson, this latest work is not strictly biographical. Jane Austen is dead by the end of the second chapter, and the everyday details of her life do not fall within the book's scope. Instead, *Jane's Fame* takes what at first might seem to be a dry, academic subject—the history of Austen's reception; in other words, how readers viewed her work before and after her death—and spools out a suspenseful narrative, complete with real-life cliff-hangers. Can Austen find a publisher for her novels, and will anybody read them? Will her books survive the 1820s, a decade in which they were all out of print? And perhaps most importantly, since so much of the tale hangs upon it, will Austen's surviving family bungle the job of preserving significant documents and recording her life for posterity?

As with *Pride and Prejudice*, that we know the outcome of this story does not detract from the interest it inspires, largely because of Harman's delightfully breezy narrative style. She excels in the art of quotation, turning Austen's fame into a character and marshalling a multitude of voices to opine about it and offer perspective. What you learn from the book—or are reminded of, depending on your level of familiarity with Austen scholarship—is that Austen cared very much about her fame; that her family worried about the incompatibility of authorship and female virtue (a woman's reputation being inextricably linked to her sexual purity, as Lydia Bennet's case makes clear); and that once she attained a foothold in the public imagination, she ascended to the ranks of superstardom in two significant leaps, one at the end of the nineteenth century and the other one hundred years later.

Harman's methodology in writing the book draws on her personal habit of attentive reading. She describes in an online interview on Book Depository (www.bookdepository.com/interview/with/author/claire-harman) how she found her entrance into the Austen story: "It was really illuminating to reread her letters, very slowly. I read them one at a time, as if I were receiving them personally, and looked up all the references. So many things emerged!" In the preface, Harman says she wants to "reconstruct" the "prefame years in the spirit of uncertainty through which Austen lived them," and she enters into the author's imagined feelings of doubt with empathic glosses. For instance, she speaks in feeling terms of the period after *Emma* (1815) was published, during which Austen might have hoped to receive more favorable recognition than she did: "[A]n air of anxious disillusionment hangs around her letters of this time, as if Austen was losing faith—not in her own work, but in the ability of others to appreciate it in the 'right' way." *Jane's Fame* also paints a poignant picture of Cassandra Austen, collecting "scraps of praise" for the novels of her deceased sister, whom she outlived by 28 years, yet never saw just how renowned those books would become.

In Harman's hands, the story of Austen's fame is one of an underdog beating all the odds and coming out on top. If "one false step" could involve a woman's reputation in "endless ruin," then the decades between Austen's death in 1817 and the publication by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh of *A Memoir of Jane Austen* in 1870, which brought her back into the public eye, were perilous indeed. In 1832, when an undistinguished publisher made an offer for Austen's novels (all out of print at the time) and demanded the copyrights, Cassandra and Austen's brother Henry parted with them for a song. Harman makes much of the family's squeamishness in this negotiation, remarking that "on the family's side, they were glad of whatever they could get." Still, Austen's

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books were brought back into print as a result of this deal, after nearly falling into oblivion, and public assessment of her for the next few decades veered wildly between devoted, albeit limited fandom and outright dismissal. The shortage of personal information available about the author who wrote the books was a stumbling block for mid-nineteenth-century readers. A woman—especially one who was a public figure—whose story was unknown was often viewed with suspicion.

The family-controlled *Memoir* helped to win over late-Victorian readers by presenting an Austen who was as sweetly domestic as she was spotlessly virtuous. Harman sets up the publication of the *Memoir* by dramatizing the nervousness of the next-generation Austens over what Jane’s niece Caroline called “this vexed question between the Austens and the Public.” The family wanted to share but not too much. They had limited sources about Jane’s life, anyway, since many letters and virtually all of her manuscripts had been destroyed or were dispersed beyond the family. Complicating the situation even more, the two branches of the family were not willing to share with one another. In spite of the obstacles, however, the *Memoir* made its mark. “Much to the family’s surprise,” Harman reports, “there was a demand not only for an immediate reprint but for more information, especially about Austen’s juvenile writing and her unpublished works.” In a one-thing-led-to-another saga, interest in Austen snowballed during the final decades of the nineteenth century, and the central (distorted) myths surrounding her life—her small scale, gentle nature, and reluctance to enter the world of commerce by publishing—took root.

One of the most pleasurable sections of the book is the chapter entitled “Divine Jane,” in which Harman presents the turn of the twentieth century rise of “Austenolotry” and the “Janeites,” alongside the growth of a following that, she says, “far surpass[es] the sentimental cult of any other writer.” She writes with obvious affection and grudging respect of one of the first nonfamily biographers, Constance Hill, the author of *Jane Austen: Her Homes and Her Friends* (1901): “Although her book is horribly gushing and emotional, she captured some interesting information from sources that were just on the brink of disappearing.” Constance and her sister Ellen, “packed their notebooks and pencils and hired an old-fashioned chaise (of the kind they believed the author might have ridden in) in order to go in search of ‘Austen-land,’ as they whimsically called it.” The sisters worked as a team, speaking to local people whose memories helped them to imagine what Austen’s home might have looked like, with Constance doing the writing and Ellen drawing pictures to illustrate the text. It was the Hill sisters who collected money to put up a memorial plaque to Austen at Chawton College, helping to lay the groundwork for the subsequent enshrining of Austen at that location.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, Henry James, himself respectful of Austen’s “intrinsic merit and interest,” fretted that the “tides” of her fame were, in his words, being “driven up, beyond their mere logical reach, by the stiff breeze of the commercial.” He blames the “body of publishers, editors, illustrators, producers of the pleasant twaddle of magazines; who have found their ‘dear,’ our dear, everybody’s dear Jane so infinitely to their material purpose, so amenable to pretty reproduction in every variety of what is called tasteful, and in what seemingly proves to be saleable, form.” Jane Austen mania was underway.

In the final chapters of the book, Harman traces Austen’s entry into the academic canon in the early 1900s, her treatment at the hands of scholars and critics, and the spectacular rise of Austen fever in the wake of the acclaimed BBC miniseries adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1995. Her own least-favorite part of the story seems to be the contribution of the academy to Austen’s fame. Giving decided preference to studies produced outside the academy and aimed at a general readership, she claims that the “academic industry around Austen” is largely “self-serving” and quotes the Austen scholar Claudia Johnson for support: “[S]ome of our most basic assumptions about how to read her novels were calculated to consolidate the authority of a new professoriate.” Whereas ordinary readers often view Austen as an intimate friend, whose characters live and breathe in everyday life, academics focus on aesthetic, theoretical, and political dimensions that require specialist knowledge and advanced degrees.

Harman’s reputation was temporarily on the line last year when Oxford Professor Kathryn Sutherland told *The Observer* that *Jane’s Fame* stole arguments Sutherland had made in her own book *Jane Austen’s Textual Lives* (2005). She made her accusation in advance of the publication of *Jane’s Fame*, and no formal complaint materialized; nonetheless, controversy clouded the book’s appearance. Discussions tended to pit specialists against “common readers,” creating a false dichotomy that did justice neither to Harman nor to Sutherland. Harman is a worthy researcher, who draws on both primary sources and the insights of scholars (and who duly cites and footnotes her sources, including Sutherland) to deliver a scintillating account of the many admirers who, over the course of two centuries, turned Austen into an “infinitely exploitable global brand.”

Jane’s Fame will surprise readers who assume that Austen’s superstar reputation was secure from the start. As this eminently readable book makes clear, the creator of Lydia and Elizabeth Bennet took steps during her lifetime to establish herself as a professional author. After she died, numerous sideline interventions and active campaigns were required to elevate her to the household-word status she enjoys today. In the words of a less-successful foremother, the seventeenth-century author Aphra Behn, one of the first women to make her living as a writer, Austen was thus saved from a fate “worse than Death, Loss of Fame.”

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