

Channeling Jane Austen in Chicago

ON A DELIGHTFUL October evening last fall, pedestrians along Chicago's glittering Magnificent Mile might have been forgiven had they wondered whether they had stumbled across an early-season costume party.

Before them strolled a group of 200 or more, dressed as if they had stepped out of a Regency romance. Gaily following the lead of a Highland piper, group members smiled at passers-by, waved to cabbies honking their horns, and laughed and waved some more as others applauded their promenade.

The occasion was the 30th annual meeting of the Jane Austen Society of North America, a 4,000-member, 60-chapter organization dedicated to all things Austen.

Founded in 1979 by Joan Austen-Leigh, Henry Burke and J. David Grey, the non-profit organization's mission is to foster an appreciation of Austen's works and life. Its inaugural dinner, held at Manhattan's Gramercy Park Hotel, drew 100 people and the notice of *The New Yorker's* "Talk of the Town."

The 2008 Chicago gathering, known officially as the organization's annual general meeting, drew far more—650 to be exact—for a Saturday evening banquet and Regency ball. The events capped three days of lectures, workshops, panel discussions and academic presentations, all centered on Jane Austen.

If all this sounds ponderous, be advised that presentations may range from serious literary assessments to workshops on manners, fashion, country dancing, bonnet-making, military matters or gardening—in fact, almost anything connected with Georgian and Regency life. Whether you want to assess Austen's effect on the modern novel or 19th-century women writers, or itch to understand the

Elizabeth Philosophos Cooper and Molly Philosophos in the guise of the catty Bingley sisters dazzle the crowd at the JASNA Regency Ball.



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rules of Regency courtship, JASNA's annual get-together likely has something for you.

"It's interesting that the three founders were a fiction writer (Austen-Leigh), a descendant of Jane Austen's family; a middle-school principal (Grey) and a lawyer (Burke)," observes JASNA president Marsha Huff. "They had the same interests in Jane Austen that members have today: They loved her novels, and they had re-read them many times."

There's always been a strong social aspect, notes Huff, a Milwaukee attorney who specializes in law for tax-exempt organizations. "Members enjoy being with others who 'speak their language,'" she explains. "We know all the Austen characters and can quote many lines from the novels. JASNA's focus has expanded a bit since the organization was founded because, once you know the novels well, you naturally begin to want to know more

about Jane Austen's life and era."

The organization also maintains close ties with several English institutions, Huff adds, including the Jane Austen Society, Austen's home in Chawton, the Chawton House Library and the churches associated with the Austen family.

"Each year our members send contributions to Austen sites in England," Huff explains. "For example, JASNA contributed significantly to the restoration of the bells in St. Nicholas Church, Chawton, which will be rung in July 2009 to commemorate Jane's move to Chawton in July 1809."

Each year, JASNA chooses an "international visitor" to spend four weeks in Chawton, working on the research project of the visitor's choice. Research projects notwithstanding, JASNA is by no means the exclusive haunt of academic and literary types, Huff says.

"Our membership probably includes

more teachers and librarians than any other profession, but we also have engineers, quite a few lawyers, medical doctors, artists, fiction writers, ministers, real-estate agents, computer analysts and homemakers," Huff says. "They share a love and enjoyment of Jane Austen's novels, whatever their calling."

That Austen continues to resonate with such a diverse group is no surprise to JASNA members.

"Her themes were universal and timeless. Anyone can pick up any one of her books and



see characters they know today," says Karen Doornebos. "We have hypochondriacs. We have obsessive moms like Mrs. Bennett. You name it, they're here. They're with us today."

Like many Austen fans, Doornebos, a suburban Chicago stay-at-home mom, discovered Austen at an early age—14 to be exact. Today, Doornebos is putting the finishing touches on an Austen-inspired novel, and at the 2008 meeting she presented a tongue-in-cheek poster session called "How Not to Write an Austen-Inspired Novel."

Other British literary figures have societies dedicated to their work and lives—Shakespeare, the Brontës, T.S. Eliot, G.K. Chesterton and Virginia Woolf, to name a few. But perhaps no other author has such wide appeal, observes Joan Klingel Ray, a former JASNA president and the author of the popular *Jane Austen for Dummies* handbook.

"Austen can be read and loved at many different levels of literary sophistication and worldly experience," says Ray, a teacher in the University of Colorado system. "Her books are one thing to a 16-year-old and something very different to someone who is 30, and then 50 or 65."

That easy accessibility is one of Austen's great gifts to her readers, says Elizabeth Philosophos Cooper, regional coordinator for JASNA's Wisconsin chapter. A second-generation member of JASNA, Cooper first read Austen in high school. "I have read her novels so many times she is like an old friend who continues to surprise me while never failing to make me laugh," she says.

Reading Austen's letters, as well as other books about Austen and her time, enhances the experience, adds Cooper, who with her sister-in-law, Molly Philosophos, attended the Regency ball in the guise of *Pride and Prejudice's* haughty

Bingley sisters. "Learning things that were commonplace to her early readers simply adds wonderful layers to the meaning of her novels," Cooper says.

And inspires a healthy cottage industry dedicated to producing a mountain of Austen-related products, from coffee mugs and calendars to books, bonnets and prints, dresses and shawls—all on display at annual meetings, and all for sale.

"I believe we moderns find the formal courting and strict Regency etiquette appealing. The reason may be that we've lost all sense of courting rituals, and really, there are not many 'rules' we can break anymore," Doornebos suggests. "It's not that we would want these formalities reinstated, but we do find the structure appealing in our anything-goes world."

The 2009 annual general meeting of the Jane Austen Society of North America is Oct. 9–11 in Philadelphia. For more information, visit www.jasna.org. 🏰



Lawyers, doctors, computer analysts, librarians, artists and engineers: Folks of every calling share a Regency passion and a love for late 18th-century fashion in the Jane Austen Society of North America.