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Cassandra's Sister



Synopsis

How did a country girl named Jenny become the celebrated novelist Jane Austen? A highly engaging historical novel by the author of ANGELMONSTER. Young Jane Austen or Jenny, as she is called, is a girl with a head full of questions. Surrounded by her busy parents and brothers, Jenny finds a place for her thoughts in the companionship of her older sister, Cassandra. There is a country life full of balls and visits, at which conversation inevitably centers on one topic: marriage. But the arrival of their worldly-wise cousin disrupts Jenny's world, bringing answers to some of her questions and providing a gem of an idea. Veronica Bennett invites us into a society where propriety and marriage rule hand in hand, a milieu in which Jenny finds inspiration to write the masterpieces PRIDE AND PREJUDICE and SENSE AND SENSIBILITY a world where a clever young girl will one day become the beloved Jane Austen.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Paris, 1794The brightness of the sky smote Jean's eyes so violently that he stumbled. He let out a cry of pain. Then the butt of a guard's rifle landed hard between his shoulder blades, taking his breath away. In the darkness of the prison cell, he had prayed that God would save him. He had reasoned that since God knows everything, He must know that many thousands of innocent men and women had perished beneath the guillotine's blade in the last few

months. God surely knew that all Frenchmen, whether sympathetic or hostile to the Revolution, were now calling these months "the Terror." But did God know how much longer the bloodshed would last? Months? Years? Until Jean's beloved France had no more martyrs to make, and no more sacrifices to offer? Now, thrust into the waiting tumbril, his hands tied behind his back, Jean knew that praying was useless. God had not heard him. His blood buzzed in his ears, louder and louder, in rhythm with the hammer-beats of his heart. Crouching in the corner, he pressed his head against the cart's wooden rail. He did not want to look at that vast sky, whose brilliance, even on this cold February day, was evidence of the glorious work of the God who had forsaken him. More and more men were pushed in behind Jean, until the tumbril was crammed as full as those he had seen on his estate in the Marais, crowded with animals on their way to slaughter. Trusting beasts, desperate human beings • what did it matter whose blood was shed? Around him, each face told the same story. These men had been condemned for a careless word or an accident of birth or because they had tried to protect a loved one. My Eliza! Swaying in the cart, his heart filling his chest, Jean felt the cold sweat of fear on his face. Everyone had heard tales of heroism in the face of execution: men who struggled, defying their fate until the end; women who went meekly to their deaths, exposing their white necks to the blade with never a tremble or a cry. But Jean was no hero. He felt neither defiance nor meekness, but true terror. He could not hold up his head before the jeering spectators. A young man, whose frail body pressed against Jean's, was sobbing. He pawed at Jean's clothes, seeking the comfort of an embrace before he was sent to his grave. But Jean, with his wrists bound, could not give it; neither could he find any words of consolation. This wretch was going to die, but so was Jean, at the age of forty-four. And did this boy have a son, and a beautiful wife to leave behind? He tried to conjure Eliza as he had last seen her. But his imagination was flooded by the memory of her dark eyes, bright with tears. A cold drizzle had been falling on the day she had taken leave of him after their brief stay in the English city of Bath. His little son, Hastings, had fretted, reaching out for the carriage that waited to take him and his mother home to London. But Eliza's lovely eyes, tormented by anxiety, had looked into Jean's. "I will return to France, Jean," she had promised. "When this madness is over, I will return." With those words she had kissed him and stepped into the carriage. That had been three years ago, in the spring of 1791. The Revolution had been in its infancy. Jean had still felt reasonably safe, far away from Paris at his beloved estate in the Marais. The beginning of the Terror was still years off. They had assumed Eliza would be able to take refuge in England during the conflict, returning to him as soon as it was resolved. A vain hope. Jean raised his head as the tumbril stopped. There on the platform stood the guillotine, the instrument of

his death. A thunderous, merciless noise arose from the crowd, who jostled one another and held children aloft to afford them a better view. The contraption – what else could one possibly call such a complicated assembly of wood, metal, and rope? – rose high, higher than he had imagined. The blade hung at the top. Jean gazed up at it. Angled, sharp, malevolent. Suddenly he knew he was going to vomit. He leaned over and spewed onto the cobbles the remains of the bread he had eaten that morning. Bound, he was unable to wipe the bitter taste from his mouth. The din increased as the prisoners were hauled out of the cart and pushed towards the wooden platform. Blank-faced revolutionary soldiers tried to quell the surge of spectators. Jean saw women younger than Eliza, chanting and stamping with joy at the prospect of witnessing his execution. Women, whose God-given nature was to create life, not destroy it! Eliza had been quite right. The Revolution was madness. Evidently, he was to be dispatched first. The guards thrust him to his knees before the bascule. Jean trembled as they tied him to it, facedown. He felt his necktie being roughly loosened. "Thank God," he managed to utter aloud, "that my wife does not know of this moment!" God had, after all, shown some mercy. Safe in England, with correspondence next to impossible, Eliza had been spared the news of Jean's imprisonment. When news of his death would get to her, and by what means, Jean could not predict. Only one thing was certain: he had no need to fear that she or Hastings would be neglected. Eliza's English relatives would take care of that. He felt the bascule tip, lowering his body into position. The metal collar secured his bare neck. He closed his eyes and saw again the pallor of Eliza's face and the mingling of her tears with the English drizzle. But there was no time to wish her farewell. The blade completed its travel in less time than it took to say the three syllables of her name.

_____ CASSANDRA'S SISTER by Veronica Bennett. Copyright © 2007 by Veronica Bennett. Published by Candlewick Press, Inc., Cambridge, MA

Veronica Bennett is the author of ANGELMONSTER, a fictional account of the life of Mary Shelley. She lives in Middlesex, England.

Spoiler alert I stumbled across this book in the children's section of the library, and since I am a lifelong fan of Jane Austen (have reread P&P esp., numerous times, whenever I need comfort) I thought it might be fun to introduce my daughters to her through a YA bio. But *I* actually ended up being the one plowing through it. I already knew the bare bones of her Tom Lefroy misadventure and the accepted, then rejected proposal, but the loving detail that this author supplies was delightful. But Austen fans should take note, this is not a pastiche of Austen's writing, so the young

Jane never says anything nearly as clever as her characters always do - though she does seem a little like Catherine Morland at times! It's not a witty book, like JA's, but it has other virtues. It finds the origin of a number of themes from Austen's books in her own life - for instance that business of the entail on the Bennet family's home in P&P that complicates all the daughters' marriage prospects. The story considers the plight of Jane Austen and her best friend and sister Cassandra, and other single women like them, in a very understanding way. But all in all, I'm not really sure whether this is a children's book - it's certainly perfect for me, i.e. someone who likes reading well written YA books. And anyone who has been entertained by P&P might want to go on to learn more of the enigma of Jane Austen the person and the writer. Give it a try!

I am very surprised that "Cassandra's Sister" isn't more popular. It is one of the best historical fiction books I have read, and at that, it is about Jane Austen! It is appropriate for all ages with nothing questionable, and offers good insight to what Jane's life may have been like as a teenager. It also sheds a new light on the books that Jane wrote and different aspects of them. A wonderful read!

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