

Episode 93 - Austen's Teenage Writings with Dr. Kathryn Sutherland

Zan: [00:00:00] Welcome to The Thing About Austen, a podcast about Jane Austen's world. I'm Zan.

Diane: And I'm Diane. And this episode, we're talking about Austen's teenage writings.

We are delighted to welcome our guest, Dr. Katherine Sutherland. Catherine Sutherland is Professor of English and Senior Research Fellow at St. Anne's College, Oxford. Her book publications include Jane Austen's Textual Lives from Aeschylus to Bollywood, Jane Austen, Writer in the World, Jane Austen's Fiction Manuscripts, Why Modern Manuscripts Matter, and the forthcoming Jane Austen in 41 Objects.

Due out in 2025 from Bodleian Publishing and Yale University Press. She is also one of the editors of the Oxford World's Classics edition of [00:01:00] Jane Austen's Teenage Writings, which makes her an ideal guest for today's episode. Welcome, Catherine. Thank you. Thank you for inviting me. It's a great pleasure.

Zan: It is a privilege for us to get to talk to you about this topic, because obviously you have worked so closely with Austen's work on this. And since we're returning to our biographical series on Austen for this episode, We're not necessarily looking at one specific passage from a specific novel, so we're gonna just go ahead and jump in with our questions.

So to start us off, Catherine, can you provide an overview of what people mean when they refer to Austen's early writings? Kind of things like what age was she writing these works, and how would you characterize her style at this stage of her development as a writer?

Kathryn: Yeah, yeah, sure. She may have begun writing as young as 11.

So in other words, soon after she left the Abbey House School in Reading, where [00:02:00] she and her sister Cassandra, Cassandra three years her elder, spent time in 1785-6, when Jane was nine to ten years old. So yes, Around the

age of 11 or 12, she begins writing, and the last of the early writings are dated very precisely the 3rd of June, 1793, when she's 17.

I think it's worth thinking a little bit about the Abbey House School, Reading. The school took its name from the fact that part of its premises included the gateway of a ruined 12th century monastery. And it must have been a highly romantic setting for a sensitive child, you know, conducive to story making.

In a letter that she wrote on the 1st of September 1796 to Cassandra, so it's several years after, she reminded her sister of their school days, and she says in that letter, The letter which I have this [00:03:00] moment received from you has diverted me beyond moderation. I could die of laughter at it, as we used to say at school.

So, perhaps Jane was storytelling at school to entertain her school fellows. I think that's possible. And their cousin, Jane Cooper, was with them at school. And two, at least, of the teenage writings are dedicated to Jane. So, I think we should think, although we don't know that she was writing at school, we could maybe think of her as giggling with the other girls in the dormitory and making up stories.

And also that wonderful gothic setting that provides her with this, you know, rich fantasy world that she clearly taps into in the teenage writings. So the last of the early writings, if she's beginning right about age of 11 to 12, the last of the writings in the teenage notebooks is [00:04:00] dated when she's 17.

But I think it's worth remembering that she may have started writing. In fact, she may have a complete draft of Lady Susan the following year when she's 18. And that by the time she's 20, she's writing first impressions. So you can't easily isolate the early writings from the first draftings of later works.

Zan: Sure. And that makes a lot of sense, right? The fact that that you can actually kind of feel the fingerprints of her younger writing. especially on things like, like *Pride and Prejudice* and obviously *Northanger Abbey*, you can feel those fingerprints very specifically.

Kathryn: I think you do. I think you absolutely do.

And of course, there are no naughty teenagers inside those later writings too. So, you know, she, she doesn't just abandon the teenage stories and move on, become a different person. She's, as you say, she's the same person. You're

asking me how I'd characterize her style in those early [00:05:00] writings. I guess I'd use three words.

One is that they're performative. Another is that they're very funny. The third is that they're critical, they're critical writings. So, if I unpack those a little bit, they weren't intended for publication, but they were always intended to be shared. So, she writes them for family and friends, for her five brothers, her beloved sister, Cassandra, and her parents too, clearly enjoyed them.

Unlike many teenage writings, they're not personal agonies or daydreams entrusted to a private journal. She's showing off right from the start. She's just showing how clever she is. There's nothing intimate or confiding about them. They're all about performance. Each one of them has an elaborate dedication to a friend or to a family member.

Some of these dedications are actually longer [00:06:00] than the mini stories that follow them, you know? So, he's just so showing off. Some are deliberately provocative as well, and she dedicates two stories to her youngest brother, Charles. We know that when she dedicates them to him, he's age nine. And one of them is Sir William Montagu and the other is Memoirs of Mr.

Clifford. Sir William Montagu enjoys partridge shooting and he's a serial seducer of young women. And Mr. Clifford has a passion for fancy carriages and travel. Now once you set those stories alongside the the young Charles, nine years old. You realize kind of how, just how ludicrous that is. They're performative.

They're very funny. She tends to make fun in these stories of everything she's reading. And that's mainly classic fiction, pulp fiction. She, you know, she loves the trashiest, trashiest [00:07:00] fiction as well. And also schoolroom textbooks. She's making fun of those as well. And in the stories, she introduces young girls whose tastes run, you know, less to needlework and home economics and history lessons, and more to boys, gambling, and drinking.

These girls love drinking. And the characters live out recognizable teenage fantasies too, I think. They, they disown their parents. They run away and steal their fortunes. They create new identities for themselves. They become orphaned and then discover wealthy and noble relatives. The kind of things most of us, actually, have imagined when we were teenagers.

And their adventures are quite cartoonish. You know, they're somewhere between Folk tales, fairy tales, cartoons, and they're all turning the tables on the

adult world. And the third word I [00:08:00] use was critical, wasn't it? I think at a time when teen fiction scarcely existed, the young Austen is, right from the start, willfully misreading in order to test the limits both of writing and female conduct.

Testing the boundaries of what a girl can get away with. And also what a reader can get away with. And I think deliberate misreading shows how early the, the activity of critical reading informs her style as a writer, because we know that her adult fictions also imply the critical reading both of society and of fiction.

So it, it's a form of engagement and. What she tends to be doing in the teenage stories is she's testing the bounds of what's possible in writing fiction. Yeah. So, you know, a novel, for example, it must [00:09:00] have action, something must happen, it must have characters, it must have setting, but do the characters need to be believable?

Do their actions need motives or reasons? Does the setting have to be probable? And she's testing all of those, often to a ludicrous degree. For example, in Jack and Alice, the one character you never really meet is Jack, and yet we're told he's the hero. And it's nine chapters long, and he only enters in chapter seven in order to be killed off, so his sister can inherit his fortune.

So she's playing around with, You know, the elements of stories and what you can get away with, and I think the challenge of all of the teenage writings is to discover how spare and puzzling a tale can be and yet still contain the elements needed to understand it.

Zan: Yeah, I think that the idea that she is Both [00:10:00] performative and critical.

I think that those blend really well in these teenage writings, the fact that she knows she's going to be reading or telling these stories with family or friends. Also, while having that all those like inside jokes of like, this is what we're critiquing. Everybody knows what they're critiquing. I think that that, that those two elements together particularly make them so darn funny is, is that it's, it's all of like, if you know, you know, is kind of what's going on between us.

Kathryn: That's right. And you do actually laugh out loud at them, don't you? They are that funny.

Diane: They are wonderfully over the top.

Kathryn: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Diane: So these works are often referred to as juvenilia. We would love to hear from you why you prefer the term teenage writings.

Kathryn: I

think

there are so many reasons to avoid the term juvenilia.

I just loathe, loathe, loathe that term. For a start, it's, it's a Latin word for works. Produced when a, an artist or a [00:11:00] writer is young, especially for the works that become known only after the writer's famous. As a Latin term, it immediately gives those works a kind of scholarly and academic flavor, suggesting they are remote from, you know, from popular interest or appreciation.

Right. It suggests too that they somehow precede talent. They're the works created not just before fame, but before the genius kicks in. So it suggests they're lesser works, works not to be taken as seriously as the mature works. Right. Right. And none of that's true about Austen, absolutely none of it. I think there's also the fact that the word juvenilia is so regularly mixed up with the word juvenalia.

Juvenalia associated with the style of the Latin poet Juvenal. who is a Roman satirist. And okay, she is a satirist, but, you know, [00:12:00] so many times when I've been interviewed, people have talked to me about Jane Austen's Juvenalia, and it's Juvenilia. It isn't Juvenalia, it's teenage writings.

Zan: You sidestep the whole issue if you just call it teenage writings.

Kathryn: Absolutely, absolutely. But also, you also show how immediately

accessible

they are too.

Zan: Right. Yeah. I think that that is a really important distinction, right? To kind of acknowledge the wit and genius that goes into these, even though they aren't often considered as counterparts or, or, or parallels to her finished novels,

that we can still learn so much about her writing process, about her thought process, like her development.

It doesn't mean that it was ever Not good. It just means that we have seen this kind of maturation essentially in her, in her process.

Kathryn: I think as well, in the very critical writing of them, you know, they're great exercises for teaching young people how to write. You know, give them [00:13:00] one of these tiny teenage stories, perhaps six pages long, you know, and you can ask them questions, you know, what is a hero?

What is plot?

Do characters

need motives? And, you know, they're wonderful. exercises in composition.

Zan: In your introduction to, to the works, you write about the fact that her nieces and nephews were actually allowed access to her writing as a way to kind of like engage with, with Jane's writings and kind of, you know, do you want to see how the novel finishes?

And so the fact that it's even within her own family, that that is kind of how her writings are considered.

Kathryn: That's right.

Zan: It shows a lot of what, exactly what you're talking about.

Kathryn: I mean, the, the actual revising hand, especially in, in volume the third, is not hers. I know critics and scholars in the past said it was.

It absolutely isn't. You know, she never changed the name of that final story, Kitty or the Bower, to Catherine or the Bower. That's, that's her nephew's hand. So she's handing over [00:14:00] these notebooks when her niece and nephew are teenagers and she's offering them the opportunity to. experiment and learn to write.

Diane: The ultimate writing curriculum. Can you imagine, like, you're going to sit down and work on your writing and your starting point is going to be Jane Austen's early works. No big deal.

Zan: See if you can improve on Aunt Jane's materials. Yeah. Good luck.

Kathryn: Well, you know, James Edward, her nephew, he was such a little prig.

He really thought he could. So. He takes this, you know, wholesome English girl called Kitty Peterson, and he gives her this highfalutin, genteel name, Catherine Percival. And, you know, colloquialisms in the story, he changes to proper English. I mean, he's a genius. You know, he's such a corrector. He's such a corrector.

He had some opinions, didn't he? And you see that in him when he was, he's an old man, you know, when he's writing her memoir, but [00:15:00] goodness, it's there as a teenager already. He was already such a, such an upright and proper and I think quite dull young man, actually. Oh, I love that. That's great.

Diane: So continuing on to talk about the notebooks themselves.

Yeah. You know, we have access to these. three surviving notebooks in her own hand. How would you describe these notebooks in the physical sense, both in terms of their actual size and format, but just, you know, how Austen actually used them?

Kathryn: They are all three of them. I've worked with them and they're all extremely well worn.

They've been much used and clearly much used in Jane Austen's immediate circle. I think that's lovely. It's lovely to know, but that's, that's the case. So, They take their names from the inscriptions on the covers that she wrote, Volume I, Volume II, Volume III. Volume I is now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.[00:16:00]

Volume II and III are in the British Library, London. All three of them were shop bought. They're blank stationer's notebooks that we just bought from a local shop. In terms of size, they're not identical, but they are roughly similar. They're all three are small quartos, which means they translate in terms of You still use inches, don't you?

They're eight inches by six and a half inches in size, so quite small. Volume I has boarded sides, cardboard sides, stiff cardboard, covered in spot marbled paper. Volume II and Volume III are covered in sheep parchment. The parchment's faded and Volume II is really ink stained all over its cover. So, you know, they're really lived in, wonderful, wonderful haptic objects.

To touch. Volume III is the shortest in terms of length, it's [00:17:00] 140 pages. Volume I has 180 pages and Volume II is the longest with 252 pages, though there are stubs that show that 24 pages have been removed and we don't know what was written on those. Oh. So that's a bit exciting. Mm hmm. There's a Latin inscription inside Volume II in Jane Austen's own hand.

which says, ex dono me patris, which means the book was a gift from her father, from the gift of my father. My dad gave me this. All three of the notebooks are mainly fair copy manuscripts, written out in Jane Austen's own hand. Volume I contains the earliest writings, and Volume III, some of the latest writings.

But that said, the chronology is not straightforward. But, you know, when you know Jane Austen, you know, none of her chronologies [00:18:00] are ever straightforward, right? You know, which novel did she write first, for instance, you know? Which, you know, everything is a wee bit complicated with Jane Austen. Volume the first is, is a miscellany, a compilation of 16 short works.

in a variety of genres. So there are stories, little plays, verses, moral fragments. And after the final entry in Volume I, she's written the date June 3rd, 1793, at which time she was 17 and a half. She may have been composing the earliest pieces soon after she left school, so around the age of 11 or 12. But Volume I, so the earliest pieces are pieces like Frederick and Elfride.

Jack and Alice, Edgar and Emma, the beautiful Cassandra. They're all datable to the 1780s. But the last pieces are the latest entries of all [00:19:00] in the Teenage Notebook. So they actually post date. The entries in volume the third, and that's the three sisters, which has a new kind of realism, a different kind of farce to it.

And also the handwriting is more mature. And the, the final pieces in volume, the first detached pieces that she dedicated to her baby niece, Anna. Anna Austen, who was born April 1793. And the final Ode to Pity, written to her sister Cassandra, which she dates the 3rd of June. Volume I is the least straightforward of the three notebooks.

It represents, as it were, her longest creative journey. Russell from The comic sketches of 1787 to 90 through to the closing entries of Spring 1793. So it's a journey of roughly six years from the [00:20:00] age of 11 to 17, and I think she probably included those late pieces at the end of volume, the first, simply because there was spare pages there.

Diane: Right. Don't waste room.

Kathryn: Yeah, they don't make a coherent whole with the rest. So that's the obvious explanation. Volume II consists of nine early compositions in a variety of genres. There are two brief epistolary novels, *Love and Friendship* and *Leslie Castle*. There's the spoof *History of England*. There's a collection of letters and there's five pieces called *Scraps*.

And on the evidence of various internal dates, the contents appear to have been written between 1790 and 1793. It's the longest of the teenage notebooks in terms of structure, and it's also the most coherent and finished. It's an absolute little masterpiece, Volume [00:21:00] II. Individually and together, the entries show a sustained and a particular sensibility.

They're different in tone from the experimental range and the ultimate disorder of Volume the First, and they're more successfully accomplished than the contents of Volume the Third. The Volume the Third kind of opens a window into the adult novels, so it's interesting for that reason. But basically Volume the Second is a continual, sustained, elaborate parody on a young lady's conduct book.

And it's A work of absolute genius, I think. It has two other hands in it, other than her own. One, of course, is the little painted medallions in the history of England that are painted and signed by her sister, Cassandra. And the other is the hand of Henry, who in the after the dedication of *Leslie Castle* [00:22:00] promises to pay Jane Austen Spinster the sum of 100 guineas on account.

So Henry's already being the banker, you know, the family banker. So that's nice too. Volume the third, she began writing volume the third on May the 6th, 1792, when she was 16. And it's the shortest of the three notebooks, with 140 pages. There are two items early in it. One is *Evelyn*, and the other is *Kitty or the Bower*.

Both of them contain evidence of immediate composition. That is, composition contemporary with inscription, with the inscription into the notebook. And they have less the appearance of fair copy than the entries in the other notebooks. Much. The shorter *Evelyn* is abandoned after only 1220 pages, and *Kitty* is also abandoned.

But after 94 [00:23:00] pages in Jane Austen's hand, and then there's continuations to both those stories in the hands of James Edward directly into the notebooks and in the hand of Anna Austen as she then was in added papers, the obvious comparison. with these two stories is the three sisters, which they all seem to be written around the same time.

And Kitty Peterson's story, the story of Kitty or the Bear, although it's unfinished, you see emerging from it the heroine of the adult novels, where you haven't seen her really before that in in the teenage writings. Kitty is fond of reading, she's lively, she's outspoken, she's impressionistic and generous, and she's kind.

Confronted with that, with that very Austen like task of distinguishing who means well by her and who doesn't, you know, that's there in all of Austen's novels, who's a real [00:24:00] friend and who's a false friend. But I think what's different about Kitty and why it's so interesting is that it is openly political in tone.

So it's social and sexual politics are clearly shaped by the period in which is written. And that's the early 1790s. And I think that in itself makes it very interesting. It's hard for me to believe, for instance, that Jane Austen did not read Mary Wollstonecraft. You know, there is a real Wollstonecraftian element to Kitty.

Zan: Mm. Mm hmm.

Kathryn: Obviously, the other thing that makes this volume interesting is James Edward entering the story and shifting it in a slightly different direction. We won't talk about him, because he's boring. Yeah, I do wish critics would just accept that, you know, his, his his additions are not worth considering.

Zan: Chuck those out, though.

Kathryn: Yeah, chuck them out. [00:25:00]

Zan: Well, I think, I think that this kind of actually lends, it leads into this kind of next question that we have, which is, is, We know that Jane Austen was incredibly well read and that she was deeply influenced by so many different texts across tons of different genres.

So can you talk to us a little bit about how, how this kind of reading influenced her own writing and these experiments that she's conducting as a younger author?

Kathryn: As you say, we, we know she was a precocious reader and she lived within a highly literary family who encouraged her reading, shaped her taste.

I think it's interesting that her very earliest teenage stories are written about the time that her brothers, James and Henry, are publishing their humorous weekly paper here from Oxford, *The Loiterer*. It ran to 60 issues from March 1789. to March 1790. And I just wonder, you know, was she competing with them, [00:26:00] openly competing?

Zan: I would believe it. She seems like she'd have a competitive vibe.

Kathryn: Yeah, I think so too. I think so too.

Diane: Oh, you think you guys can write? Exactly. Let me show you something.

Kathryn: Exactly. Exactly. She was no snob in her reading. I think at any time in her life, she was no snob. She devoured junk fiction and high end fictional life, and this wide eclectic taste seems to have been shared by her family.

So, obvious influences on the teenage writings are modern classics of the time, like the multi volume novels of Richardson Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, novels like *Sir Charles Grandison* and *Tom Jones*, the serious novels of the day. But she was also reading pop fiction. Improbable tales of, of, you know, gothic terror.

Sentimental romance. With ridiculous titles like *Elfriede* or [00:27:00] *Paternal Ambition*. *Emeline, or the orphan of the castle*. These are real stories. *Etheline, or the recluse of the lake*. *Edward and Harriet, or the happy recovery*. And juvenile indiscretions. The novel really had quite a low status in her day, apart from the exceptions of of Fielding and, and Richardson.

It had a low status in her day. And in one of her earliest letters to survive, she writes that her whole family are great novel readers and not ashamed of being so. And I think whatever she read, she creatively hijacks in the teenage writings. So, classic literature, ladies conduct books, letter writing manuals, the moral essays of Samuel Johnson.

They're all in there. They're all grist to her mill. I think evidence of the trashy fiction is stamped all over the teenage writings. For [00:28:00] instance, in the fanciful names of the heroines. You know, they have names like *Elfrida*, and *Laurina*, and *Gesalinda*. I mean, if you think about Austen's adult fiction, their heroines, the heroines there are called *Emma*, and *Elizabeth*, and *Anne*.

And they live in places like *Highbury*, and *Meryton*, but *Jessalinda* and *Laurina* live in places like *Crack hum dun berry*, and *Pammy diddle*. And *Kill hoo bury*

park. And the teenage characters too, they, they talk like sort of ciphers out of Pulp Fiction. And there's a lovely passage in Love and Friendship.

Where the young hero Edward is, is denouncing everything his father stands for, and his father wants to marry him to marry a certain woman, and he says to his father, lady Dora, fear is lovely and engaging. I prefer no woman to her, but no sir, that I sco [00:29:00] to marry her in compliance with your wishes. No, never shall it be said that I obliged my father.

We all admired the noble, noble manliness of his reply. Where, Edward, in the name of wonder, said his father, did you pick up such unmeaning gibberish? You have been studying novels, I suspect. I had just wonderful. So good. Yeah, so the characters and the author of the Teenage Notebooks are rebels. They inhabit this continuous sort of cartoon reality and sort of, it's all, life is lived in the present tense and it's all lived very hectically.

They live at a frantic pace, you know, characters like the beautiful Cassandra, Eliza Harcourt Cecil from Henry and Eliza, Laura and Sophia, the, the kind of Thelma and Louise road trip duo of, of, of lovely friendships. The beautiful [00:30:00] Cassandra, she goes rampaging, crisscrossing London. She steals a bonnet from her mother's hat shop.

She gorges on ices. She beats up a pastry cook. She takes hackney cab rides that she has no intention of playing for. And after seven hours causing chaos, she returns home with the words, this is a day well spent. I think, you know, when Jane Austen is writing, adolescence was scarily recognized as a cultural or psychological state.

But we can see in these writings, teenagers that we could recognize today. Absolutely. Yes. So she, you know, so she is testing the boundaries of what she's reading. and also of female conduct in the process. Volume II is a whole notebook structured around another early area of her reading, and that's conduct books.

I think the conduct book [00:31:00] that she is using, very deliberately using and distorting, is Hester Chapone's Letters on the Improvement of the Mind. It was first published in 1773. We know that Jane Austen read it. By the end of the 18th century, it had been reprinted individually in individual editions at least 16 times, and it was regularly bundled with similar conduct manuals to form ladies libraries of improving texts.

Chapone's book is addressed by an aunt to her niece in her 15th year, and Jane Austen is 15 when she writes these pieces. And the coincidence is designed. Not only does the teenage Austen mock Chapone's restrictive advice, but by announcing herself as an authority on female conduct, she turns the tables on the adult world and sets up the delinquent teenager as [00:32:00] instructor.

So it's a kind of, Volume II is a perverse conduct manual. And she takes Chapone's headings and she deliberately distorts them. So, Chapone has headings like, On the regulation of the heart. On the government of the temper, on economy, on the manner and course of reading history. Volume the second, you know, has instructions to girls on how to be unregulated.

So she has Leslie Castle, which is a story in which characters are food fixated and they overeat. In love and friendship, they steal and they contract illegal marriages. Again, you know, it's, it's, there's no regulation of the heart there. They commit murder. There's a letter from a young lady in which she's already started to murder her family.

And she's said she's going to murder a few more after she's finished the letter. You know, and that is dedicated, that letter [00:33:00] on, on the child murderer is, is. Dedicated to her newly born niece, Fanny, who's only a few weeks old. I mean, imagine, you know. And then there's the spoof, History of England, which is an answer to Chapone's history.

And it, you know, that is so smart because it does imply something serious about all history writing, which, you know, I think as a teenager, she's already grasped, which is that all history is written as interpreted narrative and it's all written from some form of bias. Right. So, you know, there's the young Jane declaring open that, that what all historians are, that she's partial and prejudiced, but most official historians don't admit this.

What she's saying is there's no such thing as neutral history and age 15, she knows this. Her history is a pro Stuart kind of tragic [00:34:00] comedy ending with the execution of Charles I. And she, in other words, she's glorifying the kings and queens whom the reigning monarchs of the day, of her own day, have ousted.

You know, she's, she's being deliberately provocative, but she's saying something serious about what history is. So I think a lovely way of thinking about the teenage writings is to think that they're all kind of written in the margins of the books that she was reading. Oh, yeah. And they're all kind of in dialogue with, in conversation with those books, sometimes parodying, but

there's a kind of celebration of her, of, Her reading too, an obvious sign that she just, you know, is so immersed in the world of, of letters.

Zan: Yeah.

Well, and I love the idea that since so much of this was intended to be read aloud or, you know, read with her family, that They would have also had that same vocabulary of these, these same works and are able to engage with it on [00:35:00] that level.

Kathryn: Yeah. And we know there is another dimension to the family sort of literary taste, isn't it?

In the writing of poems. I mean, I don't think anyone, you'd be very brave. Yeah. You'd be very brave to suggest Jane Austen was a great poet. But, you know, she was a family poet and they're all writing poems to each other and they're often, you know, making fun of other poems and engaging with stuff that they're reading and responding to it and they just love, they love the puzzle of literature as well as, as, as anything else.

Diane: Definitely a bookish family.

Kathryn: Yeah, a bookish family. Yeah. I mean, scarily so, I think. I mean, that would have been quite, quite daunting to live with.

Zan: Agreed. Agreed. I could, I just, just the idea of trying and like, to like, keep up with the Austens while they're having a literary discussion. You're like, yeah.

Maybe not!. Yeah.

Diane: So I mean, we've talked about this a little [00:36:00] bit already, but we would love to just hear a little bit more about what you see as the relationship between these early works and, and Austen's later published fiction and, you know, the ways that they're similar, but also the ways that they're different.

Kathryn: Yeah, I mean, in some ways they are the opposite of the adult novels, whereas as one early critic said, you know, almost nothing happens in the adult novels, whereas in the teenage fiction far too much happens. So, you know, in, in novels like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, persuasion action is, is highly limited, it's slow paced, emphasis is on psychology, on the heroine's inner life, and the slow.

unfolding of motive and event. There may be a ball, or a picnic, or a trip to the seaside, or to the local shops. But, in the main, events in the adult fiction are within the probable range of ordinary domestic [00:37:00] experience. And by contrast, the teenage mini novels proceed at a hectic pace. They're all action, and they're almost utterly motiveless, really, and that's what's so wonderful about them.

And characters are constantly on the move, you know, they're hurtling across the country for no really obvious reason, or they take ridiculously long journeys on foot, or in one short story, one of the characters actually hops on one foot across Wales.

Zan: As one does, you know.

Kathryn: It's a considerable achievement.

Plots are drastically cut down and they're speeded up cartoon style. They're sketches that actually do belong to a whole tradition of English nonsense or absurdity. The kind of nonsense that was written a few decades later by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, in which the world is turned [00:38:00] upside down and different kinds of reality collide in a kind of frantic, lunatic logic of its own.

You know, in something like Henry and Eliza in Volume I, Eliza's children are hungry, so they bite off two of her fingers. You know, that is so weird. In another story, the generous curate, a young naval officer, sends home to his family in Warwickshire once a month a large Newfoundland dog. You know, imagine arriving through the post once a month this enormous dog on the doorstep.

Diane: I would be absolutely delighted.

Kathryn: Yeah, but once you've got twelve of them, you might, you know

Zan: This is, this is true.

Kathryn: Oh, not another dog! It's the kind of comedy that relies on distortion and disproportion. But, as I said earlier, I think Kitty marks a change. Kitty or the Bower in volume the third. Because it's realistic rather than comic, and it [00:39:00] presents domestic life through the eyes of a teenage girl who is both its writer and its heroine, Kitty, and it does foreshadow themes that emerge in the adult fiction.

It's recognizably a novel by Jane Austen, I think. I mean, in the 1790s, when she's writing *Kitty or the Bar*, writers like William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Smith, Robert Bage, whom I'm sure she read, I'm sure she knew about, they were exploring the novel as a vehicle for political comment and change, and in her own small way, she's doing the same.

I think she's testing Kitty in that respect. Kitty is outspoken about the social system that's deprived her of her friend, her friend Mary Wynn who she describes as a girl of genius and feeling, who's been packed off abroad to marry a man she doesn't know, who maybe, says Kitty, a tyrant or a fool or both.

But just because she has no money, [00:40:00] she has no choice. And it's a devastating critique of society at the time. Kitty's unusually political. I think it, it is, typically Austenian, in that, like Elizabeth Bennet, Kitty has psychological depth. She has emotional intelligence. Although it's only 94 pages long, we are beginning to care about her, and to get, care about her capacity to distinguish between true and false friends, as, as we care in the case of Elizabeth Bennet.

So, I think she This does set the stage for Jane Austen as a professional novelist, the novelist she becomes as an adult. I think, too, though, as well, there are traces of the rebellious, Independent heroines of the teen fiction in the adult heroines. I mean, they're funny little traces, little gestures like and [00:41:00] Dashwood need for a stiff drink to help her cope with Marianne's hysterics.

Remember, Mrs. Jennings comes in with a glass of wine for Marianne and, and Marianne's, you know, outta it, swooning. And Eleanor says, no, I'll drink it myself. And we're told she just knocks it back in. Won't go. Exactly. I mean, that's pure. teenage. Or Elizabeth Bennet, who, you know, crosses field after field jumping over puddles, and she arrives all muddy at Netherfield Park.

Or Catherine Morland in that opening chapter. We're told she's noisy and wild, and she hates confinement and cleanliness, and prefers crickets and all boys play to dolls. It's only when she grows up that she becomes a heroine, we're told. Or I think, you know, the spoiled Emma Woodhouse, who's undisciplined imagination and dangerous way of playing with and manipulating the feelings of others.

She has something [00:42:00] of that self important egotism of the teenage heroines. I think more seriously though, I don't know about what you think about this, I think it's possible to argue that some of the disproportion and outrageous detail of the teenage stories finds a different and more disturbing place inside the adult novels.

Where, rather than lying brazenly on the surface, as it does in the teenage fiction, Jane Austen kind of sinks explosive death charges.

Yeah. Below the surface. Yeah, absolutely. I'm

thinking of things like, you know, Colonel Brandon's death. Love for Marianne Dashwood, which is based on the sensational histories of the two orphaned and seduced and abandoned Elizas.

Those two Elizas could be straight out of the teenage fiction. Yeah, right. It's so dark and sensational. [00:43:00] But in this adult novel, it's something more disturbing. Right. Or soldier mad Lydia Bennet with that great slit in her dress. You know, how did she get that great slit in her dress? You know, the story of Lydia is the motor for the plot.

Without it, we'd have no plot to Pride and Prejudice. You know, Lydia is the essential unruly energy that sparks the realist novel. into action. And I think there's something unruly and something anti novelistic hidden inside almost all of Austen's mature fictions. And I think you can trace it back to these sensational stories of the teenage fiction.

The teenage writings are little exercises or experiments in the art of the novel. And I think they're critical tools to open up and situate her famous six novels in [00:44:00] a rather different light too.

Zan: I think that's the

way that you've described that too, because we do, we've already talked about the way that, that these notebooks were so, so performative, whereas the, the published works are, are more.

Novels, which could still be read collectively, of course,

but they do

require a little bit more of that introspection.

Kathryn: Yes, yes.

Zan: And so seeing that transition from, from the performance where it's, it's lively and bright and we can laugh about it, whereas it moves into a more

interior space. I think that that makes a lot of sense that that would be where it still shows up in a novel.

Kathryn: Yeah, that's right. But she still needs this little engine, which is often a sensational element, you know, like.

Zan: Exactly.

Kathryn: Like.

The young Elliot and Mrs. Clay and the absurd story around Mrs. Smith in, in Persuasion. She needs these elements. These are sensational elements which provide the motor for the plot to some extent.

She has to, you know, what we're interested is the inner [00:45:00] workings of the heroine and this amazing, you know, psychology that Jane Austen, you know, pioneers in the novel. She was a great conversational novelist, and that's where so much is going on, but there still needs to be some, some little motor to get the thing moving, moving towards a resolution.

And so often the element is provided by something that in the teenage stories would have operated very differently.

Diane: Yeah, it's a little bit of putting what in the teenage writings would have been very much in the foreground and the main subject and it's sort of, as you said, operating a little bit in the background.

I mean, I'm thinking of the way that she would have written about Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill's secret engagement, right, in a teenage writing.

Zan: Yeah. And that, and that's such a perfect little plot that the whole thing centers on the idea that.

Kathryn: That's right.

Zan: This is a subterfuge that they've been conducting the whole time.

Diane: The drama of it all.

Zan: Yeah.

Kathryn: That's right. Yeah. Yeah. That's right. That's right. So there's this tiny [00:46:00] little seed of the anti novel inside her new kind of novel.

Zan: Yeah. Which I think is also why she's such a obviously phenomenal novelist is that she is pushing the limits. Like you said, she's saying, okay, what, what is this element?

How, how far can I push it? What, what works in humor? What works in realism? Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And, and kind of. playing with it in a way that allows the novel as a genre to kind of solidify around some of her own ideas.

Kathryn: Yeah, that's right. That's right. Exactly. Exactly.

Zan: Well, we've talked about a lot. I mean, she has so much range in these teenage writings.

And so we're gonna ask perhaps a difficult question. Do you have a personal favorite from her teenage writings? Is that, do you have one, like off the cuff?

Kathryn: Oh, I mean, I love the sheer crafted sophistication of Volume II, you know, the whole thing. I think it's quite extraordinary. And I do like to see the emergent Austen heroine in [00:47:00] Kitty Peterson.

But I'm also really fond of the outrageous mini novel, Henry and Eliza, of Volume I. I really, I really do find that quite extraordinary. I mean, here she is, Eliza, she's an orphan brought up by rich foster parents. She steals a banknote for 50 from them and runs away. She follows this up by stealing the fiancée of the daughter of her next benefactor, the Duchess of Aeth.

So she's, you know, upwardly mobile, but she's, you know, she takes no prisoners. She's on the way. Then she elopes to France and she runs quickly through a small fortune. She has a couple of children. She returns widowed to England. She's imprisoned by the vengeful Duchess of Aeth who was waiting for her, you know, on the Cliffs of Dover.

Cut. But she easily escapes to be reunited with the foster parents from the beginning. Who forgive everything and then suddenly [00:48:00] remember that she's in fact their biological child. Abandoned at birth because her father wanted a son. And all of this is accomplished in under 16 pages. Why I love Eliza is because she's a force of nature.

She is resourceful, she's independent, she's a survivor. She acts on instinct and impulse. She is all action and no regrets. And she's a match for any man or woman who comes across her path. Brilliant.

Zan: Love it. And again, in 16 pages, that is impressive.

Diane: I know, the economy of that is very impressive.

Kathryn: It's economy, it's a great little story as well.

Zan: Yeah,

yeah. Well, and this is, you know, perhaps a parallel question. Maybe it's the same answer. If, you know, is, is there a piece of work from Austen's teenage writings that you think is overlooked or you wish more people would read?

Kathryn: Well, I wish they'd [00:49:00] read *Kitty or the Bower* rather than *Catherine or the Bower*.

That's for sure.

Zan: Right. Yeah. We're chucking out

all those editing marks.

Kathryn: I think the one that we all find difficult, actually, difficult to read is the one called *That's quite surreal, quite strange*. So I think we all need to give that one more attention. Okay. What exactly is going on in that one?

Diane: All right.

A little homework assignment for us all. Well, Kathryn, thank you so, so much for taking the time out of your extraordinarily busy schedule to do this with us. We appreciate it so much. I've loved it. I've loved it. As you can tell, I've loved it. So where can our listeners learn more about your work and, and obviously everybody, when it's available for pre order, everyone needs to go out and pre order this fabulous new book of yours that's coming out next year, which is called *Jane Austen in 41 Objects*.

Correct? [00:50:00]

Kathryn: Yeah. Yeah. It's a different kind of biography but it's an attempt to answer the question of, Might we learn about Austen if we glimpse inside the biographies of objects that crossed her path? Either crossed her path in life or actually the legacy, as it were, the legacy path. So, it's curious objects.

One of them is a front door in London. Another is a fragment of wallpaper. Another is a dinner plate that was decorated by Virginia Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell, in, in, in the 1930s. So it's, some of them are expected objects, but some, I hope, would be unexpected.

Zan: Sounds fascinating. I can't wait to get my hands on it.

I'm looking forward to it.

Diane: Yes,

we are so looking forward to that. Well, thank you again. It's just been a pleasure.

Zan: Thank you.

Kathryn: Well, thank you both. Diane, Zan, thank you both very much. I've enjoyed it.

Diane: Thank you again [00:51:00] to Dr. Katherine Sutherland for joining us for this episode. You can find us on Instagram at The Thing About Austen and on Twitter at Austen underscore things.

You can also check out our website, the thing about Austen.com, and email us at the thing aboutAusten@gmail.com, and you can find our merch for the podcast on redbubble@aboutAusten.redbubble.com.

Zan: Stay tuned for next episode, talking about Anne Steele's nasty beaux.

Diane: Thanks for listening.

Bye.