

## ***Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen by Fay Weldon (Explains “The City of Invention”)***

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Imagine you are a novelist. You love Jane Austen and you want to pay tribute to her. What do you do?

A sequel? An Austen plot in a modern setting? A biography? Essays? Focus on one angle?

All of these have been done many, many times, but Fay Weldon has done something a little different.

She has created two fictional characters:

Alice is an eighteen year old with green and black hair. She is about to begin a course in English literature and is starting to write a novel. But she thinks that Jane Austen is “petty, boring and irrelevant.”

Alice’s Aunt Fay is a novelist, in Australia at present but soon to return home to England. She loves Jane Austen and determines to change Alice’s mind.

And then she has created a series of letters from aunt to niece expounding on the life, times and works of Jane Austen. All wrapped up in a simple fictional conceit.

Letter one is dazzling. Aunt Fay enthuses about the joy of reading and books. And she floats the idea of a City of Invention. Books are buildings, writers are architects and characters are the population. A simple idea made wonderful by enthusiasm and detail.

*“Sometimes you’ll find quite a shoddy building so well placed and painted that it quite takes the visitor in, and the critics as well – and all cluster round, crying, ‘Lo, a masterpiece!’ and award it prizes. But the passage of time, the peeling of paint, the very lack of concerned visitors, reveals it in the end for what it is: a house of no interest or significance.”*

*“The good builders, the really good builders, carry a vision out of the real world and transpose it into the City of Invention, and refresh and enlighten the visitor, so that on his, or her, return to reality, that reality is changed, however minutely. A book that has no base in an initial reality, written out of reason and not conviction, is a house built of – what shall we say? – bricks and no mortar? Walk into it, brush against a door frame, and the whole edifice falls down about your ears. Like the first little pig’s house of straw, when the big bad wolf huffed and puffed.”*

*“Romance Alley is of course, as your mother, I am sure, will tell you. It’s a boom town too! And it really is a pretty place. Everything is lavender-tinted, and the cottages have roses round the door, and knights ride by in shining armour and amazingly beautiful couples stroll by under the blossoming trees, though he perhaps has a slightly cruel mouth, and she has a tendency to swoon.”*

You really can’t help but be swept along. I found myself wondering about the many different buildings with the green doors of Virago Modern Classics. And where the elegant dove-grey buildings of Persephone Buildings might be.

Which part of town would you head for first?

It’s a dizzying start, but things move along quickly. The next few letters find Aunt Fay expounding on the life and times of Jane Austen. I am sure that after reading them Alice would understand that Jane Austen lived in a world that, though different, was every

bit as joyful, trying, vivid and downright complex as the world we live in now. Maybe she would have even been inspired to pick up an Austen novel

And then it's off into the writings Aunt Fay clearly has her favourites. Lesley Castle and Mansfield Park receive a great deal of attention, but Persuasion is quickly brushed aside and, from her aunt's letters, Alice would not know that Jane Austen wrote Sense and Sensibility. But of course Aunt Fay must be allowed her opinions – even if they differ rather from mine!

The pace slows rather at this point. Plots are gone over and characters analysed. All very readable though, and of course Alice must be told. For the most part it's all comfortingly familiar, but every now and again Aunt Fay shines a fresh light or captures something so well that you cannot help but be dazzled once again. Surely Alice must be reading by now. Job done.

But there is a problem. The fictional backstory that has been holding things together comes to the fore and takes up more and more of the space in the latter letters. Necessary, to a point, to hold things together and reach a conclusion, but it all feels rather contrived, and it is far from Fay Weldon's best work.

And my conclusion? – Flawed but still fabulous!

Bui before we leave let's go back to the City of Invention:

*“Personally, I see critics as bus drivers. they ferry the visitors round the City of Invention and stop the bus here or there, at whim and act as guides, and feel that, if not for them there would be no City. But of course there would be – people would walk, and save the fares, and make up their own minds where to pause and what to enjoy.”*

I like that thought, and it put another thought into my head. This book predates book bloggers, but what would we be in the City of Invention? Conservators perhaps? Or maybe cartographers? Lots of possibilities!