

“Brushes with Burney”

Review of *Jane Austen’s Bookshelf: A Rare Book Collector’s Quest to Find the Women Writers Who Shaped a Legend*, by Rebecca Romney

Sophie Coulombeau, University of York

Recommended Citation

Coulombeau, Sophie. “Brushes with Burney.” Review of *Jane Austen’s Bookshelf: A Rare Book Collector’s Quest to Find the Women Writers Who Shaped a Legend*, by Rebecca Romney. *The Burney Journal*, vol. 20, 2025, pp. 108-114, doi:10.26443/tbj.v9i.602.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

“BRUSHES WITH BURNEY”

*JANE AUSTEN'S BOOKSHELF: A RARE BOOK**COLLECTOR'S QUEST TO**FIND THE WOMEN WRITERS WHO SHAPED A LEGEND,*

by Rebecca Romney. Simon and Schuster, 2025. 464 pp. \$29.99 cloth; \$14.99 ebook.

What was your first encounter with Frances Burney? Perhaps you were assigned *Evelina* in a class at college, or found a copy of *Cecilia* lying around in a parental or grandparental home? Maybe you followed a footnote in *Northanger Abbey* or *Persuasion*, and were intrigued by this authoress whom Jane Austen loved so much that she couldn't resist name-dropping her, again and again? Possibly you came into the study of eighteenth-century culture, or of women's writing, or of the early modern novel, from an entirely different direction – but found, at some point in your career, that Burney's name kept coming up, and you couldn't put her off any longer? Or maybe – and this one is pretty unique to the Burney Society – she has always been a part of your family's folklore, along with “the Musical Doctor,” “the Grecian Doctor,” and other intriguing ancestors?

I am endlessly fascinated by people's stories of their first brushes with Burney. My own took place when I was twenty-three years old, undertaking a master's degree at the University of Pennsylvania. I opted to take a graduate seminar, led by Professor Toni Bowers, for which *Evelina* was one of the set texts. Fresh from an Oxford University undergraduate degree in English Literature, which did not at that time much promote the fiction of any eighteenth-century women writers except Austen, I was

surprised and slightly ashamed to learn of Burney's existence, and was immediately captivated by the verve and richness of her writing. While the 2002 Oxford World Classics edition of *Evelina* (edited by Edward Bloom and with an introduction by Vivien Jones) was the edition set on the reading list for that class, Bowers also used illustrations from eighteenth-century editions of *Evelina*, available via *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* (ECCO), to help her students understand some of the text's contemporary resonances. This approach, too, was new to me: my tutors at Oxford had never mentioned ECCO and, to my blissfully ignorant mind, one edition of a book was basically the same as another. Armed with my new knowledge of both author and approach, I ended up writing my essay about cosmetics in *Evelina*, including an analysis of a 1779 John Hamilton Mortimer illustration of Evelina helping Madame Duval out of the ditch following Captain Mirvan's violent "prank." My own first encounter with Frances Burney, then, was tinged with a degree of surprise and sheepishness that I had never encountered her before. It also took place simultaneously with my discovery of book history, and especially of the study of visual paratexts.

As such, I am perhaps naturally primed to appreciate and enjoy the founding premise of Rebecca Romney's new trade nonfiction book, *Jane Austen's Bookshelf: The Women Writers Who Shaped a Legend*. Romney is a rare books specialist by trade, and the opening pages of her introduction address her own first encounter with Burney. Here she admits frankly that although Austen had long been one of her favourite writers, her brush with Burney came, like my own, relatively late in life. Moreover, Romney confesses, her interest was entirely sparked by aesthetic admiration for a specific edition of a Burney novel: the well-known 1903 Macmillan *Evelina* illustrated by Hugh Thomson,

part of a series “recognizable because of their stunning emerald-green cloth bindings and elaborate gilt spines” (2). Once she had enjoyed the glittering cover, nabbed it from the seller, and tried to catalogue it for sale, Romney started to research Burney. Like many Burney novices, she was struck by the fact, encountered in one of her reference books, that Austen lifted the phrase “Pride and Prejudice” directly from Burney’s second novel, *Cecilia*. This nugget of knowledge, Romney explains, helped her to read Austen differently: “I was picking up on clues, sprinkled about in the works of Austen like bread crumbs, that pointed toward the women writers she admired” (4). Once aware of the gradual exclusion of most women writers from the twentieth-century canon – what Clifford Siskin has influentially called the “Great Forgetting” – Romney decided to embark on a quest: to assemble a book collection that reflected the principal achievements of these writers, and thus to improve her own understanding of the literary culture that inspired Austen. Within a set of pragmatic and financial parameters, she set out to assemble “Jane Austen’s bookshelf.”

Romney’s book, then, does two things at once. First, it tells the biographical stories of a number of important eighteenth-century women writers. Once the introduction has explained the author’s enterprise, and a preliminary chapter on Austen herself is out of the way, the reader proceeds through a series of chapterlength overviews of the lives and writing careers of Frances Burney, Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Lennox, Hannah More, Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Inchbald, Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi, and Maria Edgeworth. To qualify for inclusion in Romney’s “collection,” these writers must have been read, mentioned, and rated by Austen; but once this link is established, Romney tries to discuss them on their own terms.

Typically, she provides some core information about their lives, summarizes a few of their literary works (often via her own instinctive and engaging reader responses), reflects on their posthumous critical fortunes, and explains their current “value” within the rare book marketplace.

Many readers of the *Burney Journal* are likely to already have a good knowledge of eighteenth-century women writers, so it is possible that there won't be much new information here about Romney's chosen authors or the works they published. Romney is not primarily a literary scholar or a historian, and she is clearly targeting a readership who, like her when she started out, didn't know that these writers existed. Her objective is therefore to select and summarise core existing information, not to engage in and share new primary research (as only a rare handful of trade books, such as Devoney Looser's recent *Sister Novelists*, manage to do, while also telling a cracking story). Having said this, Romney's biographical sketches of these women are, in my view, pretty good stuff. She takes her information directly from authoritative biographies, and she is respectful of the established body of scholarship addressing the lives and works of her chosen subjects. The chapter addressing Burney, for example, cites Joyce Hemlow and Claire Harman's biographies, takes an oft-made but still valid tilt at Ian Watt's misogynist account of the rise of the novel, doffs its hat to the work of the Burney Centre in producing editions of Burney's *Journals and Letters*, and cites scholarship by Judith Stanton Phillips, Claudia Johnson, Richard Sher, Kate Chisholm, Peter Sabor, Susan Civale, and Katie Halsey. I did feel that occasionally Romney fell into the (common) trap of taking Frances Burney's life writing as inherently reliable rather than a rich and complex literary performance; a tendency which might have been tempered by acquaintance with Lorna Clark's

wonderful scholarship addressing Burney's narrative strategies in the *Court Journals*. I also occasionally wondered how different Romney's book might have looked if it had engaged with the extraordinary digital resource *Reading With Austen*, which quite literally enables one to browse the closest thing we have to Austen's bookshelf. But it is not possible, in a work like this, to cite or explore every relevant resource. Overall, Romney does a fine job balancing awareness of previous scholarship with a clear, playful, and engaging style that is a joy to read.

The second thing this book does is tell the story of Romney's assemblage of her collection; literally, how and why she chose which books to include, and in what editions, where she found them, how much she paid for them, what state they were in when she received them, and how she read, digested, and understood them. As a scholar interested in Burneys, bibliophilia and collecting practice – and a novice collector myself – I found this aspect of the book utterly fascinating. Aside from anything else, I have picked up a few old editions of Burney's novels and life writings over the years, never paying more than a few pounds, and (though I have no intention of parting with them) was childishly gleeful to discover how much some of them might be worth. I also found Romney's criteria for choosing her books captivating, not least because it occasionally seems contradictory. As an investigator, she delights in marginalia and other signs of robust reader usage, and as a reader she generates her own annotations with relish: "Eeee what did she seeeee!" at the famous "black veil" episode in Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is my personal favourite (Romney 80, 322). Yet, as a book dealer understandably keen to make a profit, a couple of missing title pages and the warning phrase "Rare in any condition," sends her running for the hills (Romney 73). This conflict between a

readerly tactility that creates a “dirty” book, and a commercial acumen that fetishizes a “clean” copy, was striking. It got me thinking in new ways about how condition relates to survival and availability, and how convention shapes consensus around “value,” within the rare book trade. I was also struck, in a more straightforwardly pleasurable way, by Romney’s description of the collation process (counting pages) as “an antidote to the relentlessly disembodied experience of our digital lives” (135), and by her unflinching self-examination of the ways in which, as a rookie collector, she herself had been complicit in “burying” women writers (276). Romney’s critical passion for her profession shines through, and demystifies the rare book trade in a manner that is, in my view, well worth her own book’s cover price.

Conceptually, this book shares significant ground with Susannah Gibson’s *Bluestockings: The First Women’s Movement*, published last year by John Murray, which I reviewed for *History Today*. However, I found *Jane Austen’s Bookshelf* a much more satisfying and rewarding read. Romney positions herself as a wide-eyed novice reader, but she engages with (and acknowledges) key previous scholarship in the field of eighteenth-century women’s writing, and as a result produces well-synthesised overviews of her chosen subjects. Crucially, she also shows a deep sustained interest in the books her subjects wrote, framing them first and foremost as complex authors rather than as flimsy icons of proto-feminism. She often grapples with the texts themselves with appealing gusto (the description of Richardson’s Pamela “play[ing] dead like an opossum” (Romney 111) made me guffaw). Finally, the story she tells of her own practice as a book collector adds another dimension to the book, ensuring that even the most knowledgeable Burney expert will probably discover something new and interesting.

The rapturous media reception of a book like this, stimulated by energetic publicists and media keen to get readers clicking at any cost, can occasionally be a little galling for the scholars doing the unsung primary research upon which such an enterprise rests. A recent NPR feature, for example, blithely described *Jane Austen's Bookshelf* as “spotlight[ing] eight women writers, largely lost to history.” Ouch. But such framing is not Romney's fault, and she never claims that she is “discovering” these writers in any respect other than a personal one: that first brush with Burney (and her peers) which has, at some point, been an important rite of passage for all of us. In my view, scholars have good reason to be grateful to the authors of high quality, well referenced trade books for stimulating public interest in their work and, in a case like this, for stimulating new ideas; just as the authors of trade books have reason to be grateful to those scholars for enabling them to write at all. As Romney herself puts it, “no thinker works in a vacuum” (306). And as my academic colleague Emily Friedman put it in a post on Bluesky, when the NPR article was published: “Hate the headline here. Love the book.”

I did rather love this book. It is fresh, quirky, useful, and, as one might expect given the author's day job, beautifully produced. From the gorgeous, gilt cover to the appended catalogue and fulsome bibliography, I found it a sensory and cerebral pleasure. I will be ordering it for our university library and setting it on undergraduate reading lists, hoping that it will in time play its own part in stimulating a new round of first – and hopefully not last – brushes with Burney.

Sophie Coulombeau, University of York