

Profile

Columbia's Own Jane Austen

English professor Jenny Davidson has built an academic career on 18th-century manners and morals

By Ginger Otis

Assistant professor of English and Comparative Literature Jenny Davidson is too young to say that her career has come full circle, yet she now finds herself back where it started: buried in a library in leafy Cambridge, Mass., poring over works of 18th-century literature and occasionally gazing out at the brilliant fall foliage.

"This year is turning out to be a lot like my undergrad years at Harvard," she says with amusement. "Except back then I had no money—I spent a lot of time studying."

Davidson, currently on academic leave from Columbia, has been given a place in the new Visiting Scholars Program at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cambridge. The fellowship affords her full writing privileges and complete access to Harvard's vast archives and libraries. This, coupled with a generous grant from the Guggenheim Foundation, should enable her to finish her latest nonfiction work by the time her sabbatical ends.

The work in question is a study of breeding in the 18th century. "Breeding" in at least two senses: as a strict synonym for manners ("good breeding") and as a "very biological word, evoking pregnancy and blood and all sorts of things we think of as inherent rather than acquired," as Davidson puts it.

She sees the work as a continuation of her first academic book, about the history of politeness and manners in 18th-century Britain. It was in doing the research for this book (actually, her Ph.D. thesis) that Davidson was struck by how the word "breeding" was sometimes used, to evoke "early modern British debates about human nature."

"A historian would probably approach this by looking through archives and unpublished documents, but I am particularly interested in what people wrote about the idea of breeding—how they expressed the concept in novels, plays, poems and other types of writings. I want to see what the language they used can tell us that the writer doesn't seem conscious of expressing," she explains.

Some of her thinking for the book is also based on her teaching at Columbia. "I taught a graduate seminar last fall on the idea of culture, in which I was able to work through—with the help of a really wonderful group of students—some of the ideas I'm exploring in the new book. In general, my research is concerned with questions that seem very pressing in human terms, as well as

in terms of the English department's curriculum. I'm interested in teaching major canonical writers like Swift and Defoe, but the payoff from reading them always comes in terms of ethics as well as language," she says.

Davidson is convinced that a return to 17th-century attitudes towards breeding will shed new light on today's nature-vs.-nurture concerns. "I gravitated to a century that—especially if you're an American and think of our country being founded out of that environment—speaks to us," she says, noting that the ambiguities surrounding the word "breeding" are replicated in our own times, albeit "under the rubric of cloning and reproduction versus education and public policy."

She goes on: "For a long time environment was considered everything, so it was worth funding programs like Head Start. But the pendulum now has swung back to genetic explanations as opposed to environmental ones, and that brings a discouraging retreat in ideas about human beings. It makes us more fatalistic about who we are and what we can become."

Paying tribute to Davidson's highly original research, English department

chair David Scott Kasten calls her a "force of nature: a brilliant teacher, a major scholar and a successful novelist."

The last item on Kasten's list bears noting: ever-precocious, Davidson already has a novel to her name, aptly titled (given her current preoccupations) *Heredity*, and a second novel nearly finished, called *Dynamite No. 1*, "both an adventure story and an exploration of the legacy of the Scottish Enlightenment."

As much as she likes writing fiction, she claims that if she had to choose, she'd stay inside the academy. "I love footnotes and research and doing massive amounts of reading," she says. "Writing good fiction involves giving all that up and abandoning yourself to where the story wants to go."

Besides, she is now experimenting with a new form of writing, having started up a blog named "Light Reading" (jennydavidson.blogspot.com). She says that blogging nourishes all of her other interests—in teaching, research and novel-writing. "I especially enjoy the conversations it facilitates with Columbia students—often bloggers themselves—who read it regularly."

For The Record

As someone who spends a great deal of her life immersed in 18th-century romanticism, we suspected that Jenny Davidson would take well to our rather fanciful notion of being stranded on a desert island. What books and music would she like to have with her? Who would she like to have as her conversational companion? What would she miss most and least?

BOOKS: I'm a book junkie, so that's tough. Complete Jane Austen for sure, and I'd have to have Dickens' *David Copperfield*. I'd also like a poetry anthology if I'm allowed, because poetry rewards rereading. And perhaps one dense and important philosophical work that would give me something to chew over when starved for intellectual engagement (Locke's "Essay," Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* or something by Kant).

MUSIC: Bach and Mozart are essentials, and a few favorite albums that I can't live without, by artists I've been in love with since I was a teenager: Velvet Underground, Nico or Clash. I'd also include more recent favorites like Brand New Heavies, Thea Gilmore, Elliott Smith, Mos Def and Gillian Welch. If I could cheat, I'd take my iPod—would be a lot easier.

PEOPLE: As a constitutional recluse, I'm not really sure... Robinson Crusoe had a sort of menagerie—that sounds quite appealing. Famous conversationalists in history (Beau Brummel, Oscar Wilde, George Gamow) might get tiresome in person. You'd probably be better off with a good listener: Sigmund Freud would be an interesting choice. Alternately, I might pick a favorite novelist

like Anthony Burgess. He could serve as a kind of walking encyclopedia as well as conversational partner.

MISS LEAST: Cellphones—especially other people's cellphones.

MISS MOST: That's easy: books. I could sacrifice a lot of other things—electricity, even running water (though a hot shower is one of my greatest pleasures in life)—but I'd go crazy if I couldn't consume the printed word in large quantities.



In Print & On Air

City Politics

William B. Eimicke, professor of public administration, on how to improve New York City's electoral process: "Colleges, civic groups, newspapers and television stations could do more to give potential new leaders a forum to show what they know and what they can do." (*New York Times*, 8 Nov. '05)

Law

Michael Dorf, professor of law, on Supreme Court justice nominee Samuel Alito's likely position on abortion: "Alito's past suggests that, at the very least, he would narrowly construe abortion rights. Whether he would be willing to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, I can't make a judgment based on what he's written." (*USA Today*, 1 Nov. '05)

Music

New York Times review of pianist Christopher Taylor's classical music performance at Miller Theatre: "In recent seasons Mr. Taylor, who teaches at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, has been finding the Miller Theatre at Columbia University an ideal place to try out programs that most mainstream concert presenters would never go for. In the process he has attracted a following, which explains why a capacity crowd was drawn to the Miller on Saturday night to hear his recital devoted to the complete études for piano by György Ligeti. Surely, most of this noticeably young audience could not have been familiar with the cutting-edge works of this Hungarian master composer. Just knowing that Mr. Taylor was up to something again was enough to fill the hall." (Anthony Tommasini, "A Pianist Standing on the Precipice of the Cutting Edge," 31 Oct. '05)

Math Professor Poised to Make Fresh Strides in Computational Biology

Data mining technology, which applies targeted algorithms to historical information to predict patterns of future behavior—and helps presidential candidates tailor their messages to voters and grocery stores decide which items to put on sale—may also lead to breakthroughs in cancer research, in the view of assistant professor of applied mathematics Chris Wiggins.

Wiggins is part of a multidisciplinary team that recently received a five-year, \$18.5 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to establish a National Center for

Biomedical Computing, to be known as the National Center for Multi-Scale Analysis of Genetic and Cellular Networks (MAGNet).

"The goal of the National Center for Biomedical Computing is to make it easier for the wider scientific community to exploit the power of computers to address fundamental biological and biomedical challenges," said MAGNet director Andrea Califano, professor of biomedical informatics.

"Machine learning, or data mining, is about making predictions," explained Wiggins. "The challenge for people

who are trained in the natural sciences is to make models that are not only predictive but interpretable, because most biologists don't care how well you can predict how an individual gene will respond. The biologist is interested in knowing why it works that way: which parts of the genome are talking to each other; the parts of the genome where edges exist in the genetic regulatory network that they didn't know of before."

Wiggins is also part of a team that received a \$3.7 million grant from the National Institutes of Health for creat-

ing a Nano-Medicine Center for Mechanical Biology.

"Nano-medicine is not an established field yet," said Wiggins. "Our proposal is really an approach to build nanoscale devices to look at cellular biophysics. When you push on a cell, how does the cell know, and how does physical information become chemical information, and how does chemical information become genetic information?"

Wiggins credits information sharing through the Internet for advancing the field of computational biology—by allowing researchers around the world to share and analyze

data—as well as biotechnical advances and mathematical and computational advances in machine learning.

"I'm very excited about the interdepartmental and interdisciplinary collaborations I'm working on here at Columbia, and the recognition they are now getting," he said. "Each of these grants is very rare and special, and having two of them at once signals to the wider research community that Columbia is a leading force in biological computation."

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