

Richard HANDLER and Daniel SEGAL, Jane Austen and the Fiction of Culture: An Essay on the Narration of Social Realities (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1990. 175 pp. ISBN 0-8165-1171-3)

Diane Tye

Volume 13, numéro 1, 1991

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081706ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081706ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Tye, D. (1991). Compte rendu de [Richard HANDLER and Daniel SEGAL, Jane Austen and the Fiction of Culture: An Essay on the Narration of Social Realities (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1990. 175 pp. ISBN 0-8165-1171-3)]. *Ethnologies*, 13(1), 107–108. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081706ar>

Richard HANDLER and Daniel SEGAL, *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Culture: An Essay on the Narration of Social Realities* (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1990. 175 pp. ISBN 0-8165-1171-3)

Jane Austen and the Fiction of Culture, by anthropologists Richard Handler and Daniel Segal, is the latest work in a tradition that the authors estimate extends back a decade where the relationship between literature and anthropology has become a focus of concern. Here Handler and Segal approach Austen's fiction as a record of a social world open to cultural analysis of the kind typically practised by symbolic anthropologists. In their words, the authors explore "correspondence between Austen's texts and anthropological theories of kinship, social organization, and culture" (p. 1).

Handler and Segal are provocative both in their reading of Austen and in their effort to open anthropological theory to alternative strategies of narration, interpretation and translation. In the first area, their revisionist reading of Austen — not unlike recent feminist and postmodernist thought — offers an alternative interpretation that challenges literary criticism, moving it away from analysis of Austen's use of irony and ambiguity.

In *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Culture*, the authors piece together an ethnography of Austen's social worlds, primarily exploring kinship relations and marriage. They argue that in Austen social behaviour is not determined by natural laws or by collectively held conceptions but constructed and interpreted in terms of malleable cultural concepts. In their view, Jane Austen presents cultural principles that are not social determinants but contain unrealized alternatives. For example, Handler and Segal assert that in Austen, one's social position is open to continual negotiation. As well, the authors contend that marital choice is informed by seven cultural principles that individuals select and mould according to interpretation. They argue that in Austen's work cultural guidelines exist and are known but rather than acting as determinant rules for behaviour they serve as principles for interpretation.

This ethnographic analysis pushes the social scientific use of literature well beyond the more familiar search for motifs or traditional cultural forms. Folklorists might well think of applying this kind of approach to regional, ethnic, or women's literature in order to reconstruct the roots of traditional expressive behaviour as yet not fully explored. While it may be argued that this country has not produced an Austen, what insights do works of earlier and contemporary Canadian authors hold for our understanding of social roles and cultural dynamics?

Of primary relevance for folklorists is the exploration of Jane Austen as ethnographer. Extending their interpretation of Austen as an illustrator of multiple realities, the authors compare her work to the political analysis of her

contemporaries, Burke and Wollstonecraft. Handler and Segal argue that positions that appear as absolute truths in political writing occur as alternatives in Austen. They illustrate how Jane Austen introduces a variety of cultural truths instead of presenting the authoritative voice on one homogenous culture. Her use of contradictory voices and perspectives demonstrates that everything is not resolved, in fact there may be contexts in which resolution is not possible. This ethnographic perspective calls into question the objective, supreme view that is so often the voice of anthropological and folkloristic investigation. This reading of Austen as ethnographer reminds us that the fieldworker's/analyst's appropriation of authority is a narrow and often limiting stance that in the past has sometimes contributed to a silencing of the female or ethnic voice.

It is impossible to know now what Austen meant exactly or what the social world of her time was really like. Nevertheless this analysis of Jane Austen's work raises stimulating questions about the value of literature for ethnographers and the importance of the concept of multiple realities for those of us exploring any cultural context. Richard Handler and Daniel Segal not only offer something of value for the literary analyst and the ethnographer but their book also represents an important resource for those of us in folklore who often find ourselves straddling disciplines and drawing on multiple sources.

Diane TYE
Mount Allison University
Sackville, New Brunswick

Thomas D. ISERN, *Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 1990, xiv + 248 pp.)

Thomas D. Isern's book, *Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs*, is the definitive study of harvesting and threshing technology on North America's western plains. Filled with enormous detail about the various types of machines that mechanized the labours of the harvest, his account describes the threshing and harvesting of wheat on the Canadian and American Plains from the late nineteenth century through the early decades of the twentieth century. Isern's book is primarily a descriptive one; as he states at the outset, he intends "to tell what harvesting and threshing were like before the combine" (p. xi). Focusing primarily on the machines themselves, he provides a careful chronology of technological inno-