

### **About this book**

Before the Brontë sisters picked up their pens, or Jane Austen's heroines Elizabeth and Jane Bennet became household names, the literary world was celebrating a different pair of sisters: Jane and Anna Maria Porter. The Porters—exact contemporaries of Jane Austen—were brilliant, attractive, self-made single women of polite reputation who between them published twenty-six books and achieved global fame. They socialized among the rich and famous, tried to hide their family's considerable debt, and fell dramatically in and out of love. Their moving letters to each other confess every detail. Because the celebrity sisters expected their renown to live on, they preserved their papers, and the secrets they contained, for any biographers to come.

But history hasn't been kind to the Porters. Credit for their literary invention was given to their childhood friend Sir Walter Scott, who never publicly acknowledged the sisters' works as his inspiration. With Scott's more prolific publication and even greater fame, the Porter sisters gradually fell from the pinnacle of celebrity to eventual obscurity. Now, Professor Devoney Looser, a Guggenheim fellow in English Literature, sets out to reintroduce the world to the authors who cleared the way for Austen, Mary Shelley, and the Brontë sisters. Capturing the Porter sisters' incredible rise, from when Anna Maria published her first book at age fourteen in 1793, through to Jane's fall from the pinnacle of fame in the Victorian era, and then to the auctioning off for a pittance of the family's massive archive, *Sister Novelists* is a groundbreaking and enthralling biography of two pioneering geniuses in historical fiction.

### **For discussion**

1. Maria and Jane were raised by a single mother in rather destitute childhood circumstances, before joining a world of artists, poets, and actors as teens. Which forces, places, or people seem to have influenced them most strongly? Do you see parallels between the social restrictions of women in this era and our present one?
2. What separate experiences and character traits can you pinpoint that may have led Jane and Maria to develop the literary talents and strong opinions that shaped their careers? Do you identify with any of these experiences or traits?
3. What contradictions do you see among the things Jane and Maria believed, the subjects they wrote about, and the life choices they made? Do these contradictions make the sisters more or less relatable?
4. Though Maria and Jane's frequent moves and travels found a home in their books, the people they knew had a great impact on their storytelling. How did their social circle lay the groundwork for the way they wrote?

5. Many of the characters Jane and Maria wrote about in their novels were modeled on the celebrated men in their lives, including their brother Robert, the actor Charles Kemble, and the military hero Sir Sidney Smith. These men were complex and sometimes destructive, yet they were called courageous and made remarkable differences in their respective fields. Have you read other biographies that deal with similar complexities?
6. Jane and Maria socialized with those who lived outside of polite society, including courtesans and incarcerated people, even when it put their good reputations at risk. How did these connections shape the course of their lives and contribute to their fiction writing? And what does it say that although people in polite society could be shunned for such connections, fictional characters might be appreciated for them?
7. Jane and Maria supported many social outcasts, but the one person they didn't support in his difficulties was their brother John. In fact, as is noted in chapter fifteen "[Jane] even treated her fictional characters better when they were incarcerated." What are some possible reasons for these discrepancies? What do you think makes their brother John seem less worthy of help, in their eyes, than, say, Henry Caulfield?
8. To what degree does perceived success, genius, or moral worth determine who Jane and Maria were willing to go to bat for, financially or creatively? Can you think of a time in your life when your view of someone, or someone's view of you, may have been influenced by such perceptions?
9. At this time in history, marriage for a woman offered greater social status and the promise of financial support, often in return for relinquishing personal independence and even legal control. Jane and Maria receive several offers of marriage, most of which they don't take seriously. With the few suitors they do consider, they waver and the opportunities pass. What do you think causes such internal conflicts, and how does it contribute to their storytelling?
10. At the height of their careers, Jane and Maria were well paid as novelists, yet they struggled financially throughout their lives. They often lived in genteel poverty, surviving on publishers' advances and secret loans. Their brothers, who would have been expected to financially support unmarried sisters, frequently couldn't or wouldn't support them or their widowed mother. In fact, the reverse happened, as the unmarried sisters tried to pay off their brother Robert's debts. What causes Jane and Maria to take on his financial problems? Do you find you admire or question their willingness to sacrifice their own comfort and creativity to help others?
11. Do you think Jane and Maria could have had different or better careers as authors if they hadn't taken on the problems of other people? Considering the ways in which financial and emotional strain led to physical malady, which resulted in hampered or reduced creative output, how much of the difficulty should be called self-inflicted?
12. Jane and Maria were confidantes. They encouraged and supported each other, in what became the most significant partnership of their lives. Do you think they could have been

as successful working alone? How do Jane and Maria's successes and difficulties compare with those of women writers and artists today?

**Further reading**

Devoney Looser, *The Making of Jane Austen*; Devoney Looser, *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750–1850*; Caroline Fraser, *Prairie Fires*; Megan Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters*; Tilar J. Mazzeo, *The Widow Clicquot*; Janet Todd, *Jane Austen: Her Life, Her Times, Her Novels*