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Preface

In *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* novelist and playwright Fay Weldon writes to a niece she has invented as a way of informing readers about Jane Austen and the world in which her novels were written. Through these "letters" we learn something of the physical space that nurtured Austen's narratives: a small round table in the room where she sat with her back warmed by the fireplace and a view of passing life through the window. Weldon locates the earlier novelist in a psychological space as well: seventh of eight children in an English rector's family, she and her sister, Charlotte, sent to another town when Jane was seven to be educated but neglected to the point where a fever endangered their lives. Social and historical contexts merge with the immediate psychological environment of family when Weldon asks her "niece" and readers to consider the circumstances that bounded women's lives during the last years of the eighteenth century: women of the gentry could not inherit, nor own, property, for example, so that after her father's death Jane, her sister, and her mother lived in cramped quarters (hence, her writing place) while Jane's brother and his wife inherited a spacious house nearby.

It may be tenuous to establish a relationship between Jane Austen's writing and these kinds of circumstances, but Weldon's intention is deeper and more subtle than one that can be satisfied with a search for causes and effects. She wants to understand the perspective Austen had on her world: what it may have been like to live as a person in that particular time and place, to grow into womanhood, to begin inventing another world by writing stories during early adolescence, to read those stories for their entertainment and approval to the collection of specific individuals that constituted Austen's family, and to form notions of what that invented world should be like. Weldon considers what Austen and her first audience valued. What qualities exhibited in speech and behavior conveyed a "good" character? What kinds of character, or living, should be rewarded in the controlled world of a novel where

neither coincidence nor the intentions of others, but only the author determines outcomes? Such concerns involve the nature of the novel itself and Weldon, and her readers, recognize that **Letters to Alice** is a creative form of what we, academically, call criticism or, perhaps, aesthetics.

Weldon posits for her fictional Alice the world's literature as "The City of Invention" wherein houses constructed, or perhaps only begun, by individual authors may be visited by readers who find that, like any urban area, the buildings are clustered in districts; their materials and purposes vary, but all are animated by what Weldon calls "the Idea." Her epistolary novel may be seen as a metaphor for the graduate students' papers in this issue of **Working Papers in Art Education**, and for the cumulative efforts of those who preceded them in earlier issues, joined with others, perhaps not yet considering graduate study, whose writing will be published in the years ahead. Together, they constitute a "City of Graduate Research in Art Education"; individually, they inform us about physical, psychological, social, and historical contexts in studying art, but we also may read them for enlightenment, for their authors' perspectives on the world of research, for the generating Idea that sustained these writers' efforts. In such a reading we recognize that they, too, had first audiences and we may reflect on what those audiences (mentors, fellow students?) valued in research. Collectively, they contribute to our understanding of the nature of research in Art Education.

Marilyn Zurmuehlen
Editor

The drawing on the cover by Priscilla Fenton is a fabric map from her series, "Recollections of Lost Maps."