***Narrative Bonds: Multiple Narrators in the Victorian Novel*,**
By Alexandra Valint.

Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2021. vii + 208pp. ISBN 9780814214633.

Click here to purchase

Whilst enjoyment is perhaps *not* the principal aspect upon which to evaluate a scholarly text, I nonetheless enjoyed this book immensely, and I looked forward to reading it as much as I would eagerly anticipate revisiting a favourite novel. This admission does not detract from *Narrative Bonds*' academic rigour; it is thoroughly researched and compellingly argued by its author, Alexandra Valint, who is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi, USA. Valint's Introduction hints at her book's merger of intellect and engagement, punning on the dual meaning of "bonds", which can encourage "harmony" but also foster "anxiety" (2). Bonds bind for good and for ill. Overall, Valint suggests that nineteenth-century multinarrator novels mirror the Victorian era's evolving egalitarianism, via dividing narratorial power (5). She also connects the multinarrator novel's inclusivity to "the period's gradual movement toward a more democratic state" (5) wherein the middle class rose in status, and more vulnerable groups also began to enjoy greater freedoms.

Narrative Bonds forms part of the Theory and Interpretation of Narrative series, edited by James Phelan et al. Narratology runs the theoretical risk of miring its readers in detail so dense the overarching point is lost, but Valint elegantly avoids this possibility by offering original, yet accessible, narrative perspectives using canonical (and thus familiar) Victorian novels, including Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Several chapters pair the more famous novel with a lesser-known work; such a pairing intensifies the argument's originality by expanding our understanding of well-known novels, while also introducing readers to under-studied texts.

Drawing upon the work of Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal, and Wayne Booth, among others, Valint identifies the gap in narratological theory, wherein "[n]arratology often seems to presume texts with one narrator, and multinarrator setups other than the frame narrative and epistolary novel have been generally overlooked" (17). She thereby privileges Victorian novels featuring multiple narrators, via which she argues for the critical distinction between *facts* and *perspectives*. Referencing Margaret Oliphant's 1880 novel *A Beleaguered City*, Valint points out that "none of the five narrators present a fact that invalidates or contradicts facts presented by other narrators. The characters' interpretations of those facts predictably differ, but the facts themselves align" (1-2). A narrator might therefore be mistaken because their analysis is flawed, but, crucially, "narrators do not willfully lie in Victorian multinarrator novels" (12). For instance, in *The Moonstone*, Miss Clack's interpretation may prove faulty, but her facts remain sound. Valint expands this argument to point out that Laura Fairlie's fake memories preclude her from narrating *The Woman in White*, because "[s]he does not just misinterpret events...rather, she believes that certain events transpired that did not occur in reality" (15). Faulty interpretation is permitted, but faulty facts are not.

Chapter 1 positions the Victorian novel on a historical continuum, situated between works by other authors such as eighteenth-century Samuel Richardson and twentieth-century Virginia Woolf. Eighteenth-century novels often had "hidden" editors, "devot[ed] to upholding the novel's moral realism" (26). Conversely, Victorian novels feature embodied author-editors who "habitually explain how, when, where, and why these narratives were written, revised, transcribed, requested, given, read, and collected" (33).

In her second chapter, Valint details the "interweaving" and "cooperation" (47) between *Bleak House'*s two narrators, Esther Summerson and the unnamed narrator, cleverly deeming them "dual—not duelling—narrators" (52). Valint offers a more favourable view of Esther than many critics have allowed, proposing that Esther "creates herself as a woman of depth by confessing her unspoken thoughts..." (48). This chapter's highlight is Valint's exploration of *Bleak House'*s illustrations—an inclusion accentuating Esther's complexity by connecting the young narrator's "desire to emphasize and protect her own depth" (69), and her often obscured (illustrated) face. Esther's significance stems from her mind, rather than her image.

The third chapter, which explores *Treasure Island*, differs from the other chapters in that its "quick switch" format "retain[s] the sense of possessing a primary narrator" (79). This chapter is the text's weakest, uneasily reminiscent of a hasty diversion (a quick switch even?), but perhaps this discomfort is due to the novel's lack of narrative cooperation. Nonetheless, it still supports Valint's argument about the *factual* agreement between Victorian multinarrators: "the second narrative [Dr. Livesey's] is markedly unreliable on the axis of reading (interpretation) or regarding (ethics) but not on the axis of reporting (of facts)" (80). This links to Valint's assertion about Miss Clack's interpretative unreliability but factual accuracy.

Chapter 4 is the book's most important. Focusing on Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, *The Moonstone*, and *The Legacy of Cain*, Valint outlines the essentiality of disabled narrators in "defeat[ing] the villain—a character who, in all three novels, is able-bodied/minded and ruthlessly independent" (102). Indeed, embracing human limitations—including Franklin Blake's amnesia—is pivotal to solving the *Moonstone's* mystery. Disability is therefore imbued with agency, even as it encourages narrative cooperation.

In her fifth chapter, Valint offers an original perspective on the perennially popular *Wuthering Heights*, arguing extensively against the traditional assumption that Lockwood's narrative is a diary. Privileging this textual ambiguity, Valint proposes what she terms the "permeable frame", wherein Nelly and Lockwood "attempt to keep the gothic at bay; they try, usually ineffectually, to maintain interpersonal boundaries..." (150). This tension manifests in a "hazy separation" (149) between their narratives as the gothic permeates the novel's frame.

Valint's conclusion encompasses an Epilogue, which introduces new material on *Dracula*—whose plethora of narrators is interesting enough to warrant a solo chapter. I would also have welcomed a (brief) consideration of how neo-Victorian novels might participate in this multinarrator conversation, particularly given neo-Victorianism's emphasis on hidden narratives and overlooked perspectives. Nonetheless, *Narrative Bonds* is a persuasive contribution that will doubtless be welcomed by scholars and Victorian novel enthusiasts alike.

Kathryne Ford
School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics
Australian National University