

Elaine Freedgood

The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel will prove a fine friend to Victorianists. Reading this volume at the mid-semester moment here in the weary and frazzled atmosphere of lower Manhattan reinvigorated my somewhat battered sense of the magnificent aspirations and achievements of the fiction I am presently teaching, with limited success, to understandably distracted undergraduates. But in any circumstances, this collection of essays would provide both wonderful reading about and wonderful readings of an extensive selection of Victorian novels.

Deirdre David's Introduction succeeds in reproducing for us much of the original excitement and anxiety provoked by the ubiquity of novels and novel-reading in the nineteenth-century. David takes us on a wonderful tour of the form and content of the novel, answering Henry James's famous question about the baggy monstrosity of so many Victorian three-deckers with the verve and edge of a feminist critic alert to the complications of gender, sexuality, class, and empire. I particularly like the idea that the monstrosity of form finds its analogue in the monstrosity of content: David insists that the social and psychological travails created by industrialisation, poverty, marital abuse, and domestic misery that we find again and again in Victorian fiction be understood not in the typical anodyne formulations of "problems" or "questions," but as profound deformations of human relations.

Many of the essays live up to the high standards and spirits of the Introduction. Bibliographically and theoretically rich, Kate Flint's essay on readers provides a detailed sociology and psychology of Victorian novel-reading that gives us a sense of what novels were thought to do to and for their original readers, and how we might think about those subjective and social processes now. Nancy Armstrong challenges us with a strong claim in her essay, an energetic coda to her pervasively influential *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1989). She extends part of the argument of that book – that eighteenth-century fiction produced femininity as we have come to know it and with it nothing less than modern subjectivity – to argue that nineteenth-century fiction produced a form of femaleness that has also come to seem transhistorical in its essential nature and that has provided a further disciplinary agenda for the modern subject. Female characters – from Jane Eyre to Catherine Earnshaw to Lizzie Eustace – cannot reconcile their needs for "sexual gratification" with their needs for "social survival." Armstrong's analysis of the necessary loss or foreclosure of sexual desire, and the consequent diminution of personhood in the face of the need to survive socially leads to a productive reconsideration of the force exerted by desire and the strategies to contain it in a range of novels. On the other hand, Jeff Nunokawa keenly observes not only the regulation of desire in the novel's household-safe words, but also the sometimes regulatory force of desire in the making of individuals who can function well within the conflicting demands imposed on them by industrialised capitalism. In his dazzling mini-readings of a number of novels we get a kaleidoscopic sense of the meanings and the uses of sexuality in an historical moment in which every last bit of energy, including in Nunokawa's description sexual energy, had to be put to work, conducting business and keeping cash flowing. Joseph W.

Childers also focuses on work: he gives us nothing less than a condensed but incredibly useful reading of what seems like every major and many minor works of “industrial fiction.” Also fascinating are Ronald Thomas’s theoretically provocative essay on detection and the policing of subjectivity that the detective novel accomplishes both within and beyond its own pages, and Patrick Brantlinger’s wide-ranging meditation on the meanings of race and its cultural deployment in a wide range of novels and their relationship to texts like travel and exploration memoirs as well as to “scientific” treatises on race. Any of these essays would be extraordinarily useful in organising various kinds of courses on the Victorian novel; they also sum up with great economy and interest the work of the past ten to fifteen years on the subjects they cover.

Curiously, I found the group of essays with the most predictable and now-hackneyed (thank goodness) titles and topics – “Race and the Victorian Novel,” “Gender and the Victorian Novel,” “Sexuality and the Victorian Novel” – to be the richest and the most readily useful to me as a teacher and scholar. Less successful, and less apparently useful, were the essays that broke out of what would seem to be the overly-formulaic approach of the “... and the Victorian Novel” model. Essays that were more tightly focused, like Linda Shires’s essay on the aesthetics of the Victorian novel and Robert Weisbuch’s “Dickens, Melville, and a Tale of Two Countries,” seemed less companionable and more journal-like than the more freewheeling and bibliographically suggestive essays discussed above.

I have two kinds of questions for Deirdre David. First, I wonder how exactly Professor David imagined this *Companion* to be used. Is it meant primarily for teachers, or was it imagined as a possible textbook? Or, is it more of a reference work for a student setting out to do a particular kind of paper or project? I can imagine directing such a student to one of the essays here, for example, for the purposes of understanding the state of gender studies or the critical work on race in the period.

My second set of questions simply offer me the opportunity to solicit speculations on the future of our field, and specifically about the study of the novel. How might this *Companion* change when it is compiled again in ten or fifteen years? Where are we going in the study of the Victorian novel; what issues will we be looking back on in 2011? Will some of the categories posited here remain, or might such newly reified categories as sexuality or the idea of industrial culture be transformed? Such speculations would be a nice bookend to the celebration of the endless richness of the Victorian novel and the study of it that the volume so generously and usefully provides.

Barry Qualls

“They take us everywhere,” Deirdre David says of Victorian novels. In her introduction to this collection of essays on the Victorian novel as it is read a hundred years after Victoria’s death, she reminds us of how this fiction that was once discredited as all too evocative of its culture – part of what H.G. Wells labelled “the