

Patrick C. Fleming, *Animating the Victorians: Disney's Literary History*. UP of Mississippi, 2025. xvi+237 pp. ISBN 9781496855381

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland begins with the titular character, a little girl of about seven years of age, wondering, "what is the use of a book... without pictures or conversations?" Alice's innocent question shows just how popular illustrated children's books had become during the Victorian period. In the nineteenth century, the literary market began to cultivate a new kind of reader—a child, imaginative and curious like Alice—and by the twentieth century, the Golden Age of Animation (1930s–1960s) introduced cartoons for children and families alike, establishing Disney as a household name. This connection between Victorian literary culture and Disney (both the man and the corporation) is the focus of Patrick C. Fleming's *Animating the Victorians: Disney's Literary History*.

Fleming's monograph is part of the North American Children's Literature Association book series. Its premise originated from a 2014 NEH summer seminar that Fleming attended, and evolved from one of his previous courses named "Disney's Victorians." *Animating the Victorians* examines Disney's adaptations of Victorian texts, tracing their development from early cartoon shorts to full-length feature films, while also analyzing the company's capitalist expansion into merchandise and theme park attractions inspired by nineteenth-century children's novels. Fleming's extensive research, some of it based on the Disney archives, additionally shows how writers at the Disney animation studio sought inspiration from Victorian texts, their authors' lives, and the Victorian theatre and entertainment industry. Therefore, this monograph is about production and adaptation as much as it is about Victorian literary culture and the social rules and codes that inspired and affected ideas seen in children's literature of the 19th century.

Animating the Victorians considers the cultural and social context of Victorian literature as well as the profound impact Victorian society had on Walt Disney, who appeared to see similarities between himself and Victorian writers like Charles Dickens. In his introduction, Fleming states, "Victorian studies and the Walt Disney Company developed in tandem" and observes, "readers can find rich discourses of interdisciplinary scholarship both about the Victorian period and Disney. This is the first book to link those two discourses together" (xiv). Fleming crafts a persuasive call to reflect on "the future of literary studies in a world increasingly shaped by global media corporations" (xiv). *Animating the Victorians* convincingly argues that these connections between Disney and Victorian literature and culture open up a new terrain for other scholars within the field of Victorian Studies.

In chapter one, Fleming discusses copyright law, the connection between Victorian public entertainments and the Disney theme parks, and Disney's adaptation of *Oliver Twist*. Chapter two makes further connections between the Disney company and the Victorian era by discussing Disney's multiple attempts to adapt *Alice in Wonderland*, a story that differs from other Victorian children's books which were often didactic. Fleming shows how the whimsical, yet strange plot of Lewis Carroll's novel aligns with the typical structure of Disney's earlier cartoons based around "gags." In chapter three, Fleming focuses on the writer, Hans Christian Anderson, whose rags-to-riches story was similar to that of Walt Disney himself. This chapter looks at adaptations of "The Ugly Duckling," and finishes by using queer theory to explore Anderson's sexuality and the queer themes present in his fairytales. Chapter four shows how Disney's

representations of princesses and pirates support and challenge Victorian gender roles, focusing on Queen Victoria, her daughters, and public perceptions of the Victorian royal family.

The detailed literature review of this text is not placed in the introductory chapter and is instead a separate section included after the conclusion. Titled “The Appendix,” this section is organized around the three following questions: “Why Disney? Why the Victorians? And why the two together?” (157). Fleming begins by looking at Frances Clarke Sayers’s “Walt Disney Accused,” Richard Schickel’s *The Disney Version*, and Henry Giroux’s *From Mouse to Mermaid*. The review also draws from scholarship on Victorian entertainment such as *The Shows of London* by Richard Altick, Lee Jackson’s *Palaces of Pleasure* and work on Victorian theatre such as Carolyn Williams’s *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, and Parody*. Building on this foundation of scholarship, Fleming’s conclusion extends his analysis to the ideological implications of both Disney and Victorian culture studies.

Fleming’s conclusion begins with a discussion on the Victorian imperialism which is present in texts that inspired Disney movies such as *The Jungle Book*. Looking at Disney and Victorian literature through a postcolonial lens, Fleming draws on the ideas of Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Ariel Dorfman, and Armand Mattelart, to emphasize how “this link between capitalism and colonialism, and the concurrent rise of cultural studies alongside postcolonial studies, inevitably shaped critiques of the Walt Disney Company, which has been described as ‘an empire that conquers, colonises, and capitalises upon its textual sources’” (151). Fleming also stresses, however, the importance of the “cultural heritage” left behind by both Disney and the Victorians (155). He concludes by stating that both Disney media and Victorian texts are often perpetrators of imperialist ideals; therefore, readers and scholars shouldn’t just mindlessly accept or outright reject the influence of Disney and the Victorians on our modern culture. Instead, we have the agency to choose not only which texts we focus on, but also how we analyze them (155).

The chosen format and organization of *Animating the Victorians* make this book accessible to a broader public. Therefore, readers without an extensive background in Victorian culture, children’s literature, and Disney studies can still appreciate *Animating the Victorians*. Additionally, this monograph will be of special interest to scholars engaging with Victorian literature and culture, children’s literature, Disney studies, and adaptation studies.

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