

***Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century (Neo-Victorian Series, Volume 3)***

Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, eds. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012. 340pp.

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Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben's edited volume *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-imagined Nineteenth Century* acknowledges the unmistakable influence of the Gothic on the neo-Victorian, and the collection's essays provide a range of nuanced discussions of the intersection between the two genres. For example, neo-Victorian novels borrow substantially from Gothic fiction by adopting its narrative motifs and formal structure. In the chapter "‘Fear is Fun and Fun is Fear’: A Reflection on Humour in Neo-Victorian Fiction", Gutleben contemplates the humorous use of Gothic tropes in neo-Victorian fiction, while Kym Brindle's "Dead Words and Fatal Secrets: Rediscovering the Sensational Document in Neo-Victorian Gothic" discusses the use of the found manuscript, a staple of Gothic fiction, in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) and Beryl Bainbridge's *Watson's Apology* (1984). Brindle argues that in both novels, we see "the processes of reading documentary traces in order to stress the role of interpretation and impel readers to assess 'evidence' in the contest of a Gothic excess of competing accounts" (295).

Jerrold E. Hogle suggests that the Gothic is a "highly unstable genre" (1). It is this malleability of the Gothic – its constant change and evolution – that has attracted writers to it. Indeed, neo-Victorian fiction can be seen as another "apparition" and "manifestation" of the haunting Gothic and can be read as a meta-Gothic phenomenon. As Kohlke and Gutleben assert in the collection's introductory essay, the neo-Victorian is "*by nature quintessentially Gothic*" (4 original emphasis). They suggest that there is a "generic and ontological kinship" (4) between the Gothic and the neo-Victorian, as both are characterised by a desire to resurrect and confront the past as well as to explore its often-sensationalised mysteries.

It must be clarified, however, that if the Gothic is a significant influence in neo-Victorian novels, it is often seen less in the thematic concerns of individual novels than in an overall sense of the phantomatic, the characteristics of which haunt the entire neo-Victorian genre. However, some works are more explicitly Gothic than others. Several chapters in *Neo-Victorian Gothic* focus on texts with overt affiliations with the historical Gothic, including Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian* (2005) (a remediation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* [1897]), Albert Wendt's "Prospecting" (1983) (a reworking of Polynesian Gothic tale), Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl's Oceanic ghost story *Old Nā Iwi* (1994), and Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's graphic novel series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-2009), which skilfully incorporates a number of Victorian Gothic figures). Finally, the "Jack the Ripper" mystery, which continues to capture the popular imagination, is the subject of both Max Duperray's "‘Jack the Ripper’ as Neo-Victorian Gothic Fiction: Twentieth-Century and Contemporary Sallies into a Late Victorian Case and Myth" and Sarah E. Maier's "Chasing the Dragon: Bangtails, Toffs, Jack and Johnny in Neo-Victorian Fiction".

Perhaps the most recognisable feature of the Gothic found in neo-Victorian novels is that they are "haunted" by the past. Broadly speaking, there are three interconnected types of haunting that can be seen in neo-Victorian fiction. In the first type, characters within the works are often haunted by Victorian ghosts. These ghost characters are fitting metaphors for the nineteenth century, as they emphasise one pronounced attribute of the "Victorian

ancestors”: they are dead. The second type of haunting is the use of real nineteenth-century figures within the narratives. These figures are resurrected as characters within neo-Victorian novels, yet these rebirths only provide echoes of the lives of long-dead historical figures.<sup>1</sup> Patricia Pulham’s “Neo-Victorian Gothic and Spectral Sexuality in Colm Tóibín’s *The Master*”, for example, discusses the revival of Henry James in Tóibín’s novel. Interestingly, Pulham argues that while Tóibín creates a “spectral” James, James is in turn haunted by ghostly memories and homosexual desires. Just as the contemporary is preoccupied by the Victorian past, the Victorian characters within neo-Victorian literature may also be preoccupied by history. Thirdly, the neo-Victorian genre can be seen as haunted by the nineteenth century. The powerful presence of this historical period can be felt throughout all novels within the genre, whether the works attempt to champion or to undermine Victorian accomplishment and values. This type of haunting not only encompasses the other two forms of haunting, but also speaks to the great influence of the Victorian on fiction and culture.

The neo-Victorian’s attempt to address nineteenth-century gender inequalities is also explored and questioned in *Neo-Victorian Gothic*. Marie-Luise Kohlke’s “Neo-Victorian Female Gothic: Fantasies of Self-Abjection” discusses the implications of the fact that many neo-Victorian Gothic heroines fail to “escape from confining cultural norms” (248). Kohlke concludes that their victimisation is not a literary pose or indulgence but is instead an accurate critique of the cultural processes (including those of the Gothic itself) which continue to reduce fictional and real women to ready victims. Jeanne Ellis’s “A Bodily Metaphorics of Unsettling: Leora Farber’s *Dis-Location / Re-Location* as Neo-Victorian Gothic”, on the other hand, seeks to understand settler identity through the bodily transformative work of the South African artist Farber, who constructs “post-apartheid white female subjectivity” as a “gothic horror story” (123-24).

Gothic texts are often set in the past so as to express contemporary anxieties from a remove. While in earlier Gothic texts, the setting tends to be an enclosed and antiquated space, such as an isolated castle or an underground labyrinth, through time, this space has been interpreted differently, reflecting the concerns and worries of subsequent ages. The Victorian Gothic, for example, is often set in the city, whose night streets and criminal inhabitants produce an unnerving effect on readers. In contemporary Gothic, this enclosed space may even be interpreted metaphorically, so that the human heart and brain are presented as kinds of prisons (Spooner 18). The genre is constantly updating and refashioning itself in line with contemporary devices and sentiments. A case in point is the interactive neo-Victorian fiction *Slouching Towards Bedlam* (2003), a hybrid steampunk novel and game, in which the reader assumes the role of a doctor at the Bedlam asylum, and the subject of Van Leavenworth’s chapter “Epistemological Rupture and the Gothic Sublime in *Slouching Towards Bedlam*”. In this essay, Leavenworth examines how the reader/player experiences a sense of the Gothic sublime while working through the narrative.

As Julian Wolfreys has it, “The gothic becomes truly haunting in that it can never be pinned down as a single identity, while it returns through various apparitions and manifestations” (xv). In its chapters, *Neo-Victorian Gothic* provides an important and varied exploration of the many ways in which the Gothic continues to haunt contemporary fiction. The collection suggests that it may not be possible to “pin down” the Gothic, yet it offers an essential examination of the neo-Victorian novel and its contemporary “apparitions” and “manifestations” of the forever-haunting Gothic genre. As such, *Neo-Victorian Gothic* reveals how the neo-Victorian genre may be considered a new typology of the Gothic or its contemporary “heir”, suggesting a genealogy that stretches back more than two centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> The liminality of the characters in neo-Victorian novels to some extent reflects the liminal state of these novels themselves, as they exist in a kind of narrative “limbo”. Deliberately putting on the identity of Victorian novels, they are not quite like other contemporary novels, and yet they cannot truly be considered authentic Victorian works. They occupy the threshold between Victorian and contemporary novels.

## Works Cited

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