

Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009.

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
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Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009 is underpinned by a central question about this burgeoning genre: “what does it mean to appropriate the Victorians to suit our needs?” (27). Chapters on memory and mourning, race and empire, sex and science, spectrality and s(p)ecularity, magic and metatextuality, and adaptation expose a multiplicity of ways in which neo-Victorian fictions work through contemporary anxieties and preoccupations. “Metahistorical” fictions, like the neo-Victorian, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn contend, are equally concerned with the present as with the past.

Like much scholarship in the field, *Neo-Victorianism* concentrates on novels, with a lesser emphasis on film and television. In their definition of the term, Heilmann and Llewellyn distinguish neo-Victorian fiction from historical fiction set in the nineteenth century that simply aims to mimic the past by arguing that it “must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (4). This requirement of metatextuality and metacriticism determines that all neo-Victorian texts “are necessarily adaptations or appropriations, be it of plots, characters, or intellectual concerns and cultural preoccupations” (244).

Chapter One focuses on four novels steeped in a variety of literary and familial “inheritances” (Wesley Stace’s *Misfortune* [2005], Sarah Blake’s *Grange House* [2000], Diane Setterfield’s *The Thirteenth Tale* [2006] and John Harwood’s *The Ghost Writer* [2004]). All of these neo-Victorian fictions are situated as “haunted” by “a condition of estrangement”, which Heilmann and Llewellyn argue “offers an apt relationship to the Victorian past, a past deceptively familiar to us [...] yet always remote from our experience” (63). The quest for these neo-Victorian protagonists to return to their origins, and the uncanny elements related to their journeys, are likened to the workings of our own engagement as contemporary readers with literary and cultural history.

Chapter Two examines how contemporary novels written from the perspective of both colonial subjects and members of the imperial elite “aim to reinterpret the identity politics of imperialism” (29). It reads four novels (Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* [2008], Laura Fish’s *Strange Magic* [2008], Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love* [1999] and Kate Pullinger’s *The Mistress of Nothing* [2009]) in light of Bhabha’s concept of hybridity and Spivak’s notion of the silence of the subaltern, arguing for their “central commitment to political revisionism” (104).

Heilmann and Llewellyn suggest that, after race and empire, the second major theme of the neo-Victorian is the questioning of the ways in which science discourse produced ideas of gender and sexuality. Chapter Three utilises feminist theories of science, the body, pornography, and the gaze, to consider Jane Harris’s *The Observations* (2006), Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Hottentot Venus* (2003) and Belinda Starling’s *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2006). As in the example of postcolonial neo-Victorian fiction, these three novels present protagonists who resist real historical abuses. In doing so, Heilmann and Llewellyn argue, their female authors “problematize the multiple ways in which sexual, social, and racial hegemonies were created and maintained by the scopophilic, disciplining, mutilating regime of science” (140).

Chapter Four develops the monograph's foundational idea about the neo-Victorian relationship with the present, arguing that the five novels considered within it, "use ghosts and the spectral to talk with the living" (171). It innovatively reads glass, in the forms of windows, mirrors, and lenses, as metaphors for these ghosts, both in terms of the Victorian period's own interest in the supernatural and the contemporary desire to harness the "reflective possibilities of the historical mirror" (144).

Heilmann and Llewellyn describe metafiction as "sustained by textual illusion", paying particular attention to what they describe as "sophisticated" neo-Victorian fictions that self-consciously draw attention to "the nature of the 'trick' or game being played with readers, viewers, and critics" (31). In Chapter Five, they argue that a selection of novels and films "self-consciously mimic the strategies of Victorian stage magic in order to entangle us in a performance of illusionism" (175). These texts reveal to their audience that the construction of "reality" is, in actuality, the effect of smoke and mirrors

The final chapter shifts gears to take address more general "cultural appropriations" of the Victorian, including TV and theatrical adaptations of nineteenth-century texts and "theme-park Victoriana" such as museums and visitor attractions. It emphasises that these texts are not simply in dialogue with the Victorian, but also are engaged in complex interplay with the adaptations that have come before them. The chapter also problematises contemporary demands for "authentic" experiences of the nineteenth century (as in the instance of the Dickens World theme park), particularly when Victorian fiction is imagined as a window on Victorian reality.

Neo-Victorianism is essential reading in the emerging field of neo-Victorian studies. Through insightful application of a diverse range of critical theory, from Baudrillard to Linda Hutcheon's conception of adaptation, it successfully opens up the thematic concerns of neo-Victorian fictions of the early twenty-first century. Heilmann and Llewellyn's narrow focus enables in-depth treatment of novels published within one decade, yet their significant and already influential conclusions also highlight the need for further attempts to theorise neo-Victorianism in areas that are excluded from the scope of their study, including fashion, gaming, and children's literature, as well as those that are afforded less attention, such as film and television.

With reference to A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* (2009), Heilmann and Llewellyn describe the neo-Victorian fiction reader "who stands peering at the display case glass that has itself become a mirror" (163). This image aptly embodies one of monograph's most crucial strands. *Neo-Victorianism* skilfully demonstrates that the reinterpretation of the Victorian is actually a tool for negotiating the present: by blurring the distinctions between historical fact and fiction, the genre presents us with a distorted view of both the nineteenth century and the present (167).

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