



Kym Brindle. *Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Diaries and Letters*

Kym Brindle. *Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Diaries and Letters*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. vii, 240p., ill. ISBN 9781137007155. £50 (hardback).

Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction explores the ways in which diaries and letters are used by neo-Victorian novelists to exemplify postmodern ideas about the unknowability of the past. The textual remains of the nineteenth century are necessarily incomplete, meaning that the past can never be entirely understood. Brindle argues that lacunae in the historical record have been colonized by neo-Victorian novelists. They use diaries and letters — which are vulnerable to interception, theft, and destruction — as part of pastiche practices to emphasize the fragmentation of the historical record and to promote a metacritical agenda. Their fictionalization of Victorian mysteries and marginalized figures, whose experiences were often excluded from history, encourage readers to reflect on their reading practices and to consider the extent to which any attempt to construct a narrative of the past necessarily involves assumption and invention. These ideas are developed over six chapters, an introduction, and a postscript.

In the introduction, Brindle explains that she uses “epistolary” to describe fiction featuring embedded diaries as well as letter exchanges, arguing that neo-Victorian novelists often blur distinctions between the two forms (for instance, by creating a diary intended for a particular reader). In the chapter that follows, Brindle develops her discussion of neo-Victorianists’ use of diaries and letters in relation to Victorian literature, literary criticism, and theory. These first two chapters are well researched, providing good introductions to key concepts associated with diary fiction, epistolary novels, historical fiction, and the neo-Victorian novel; they will be useful to students and specialists. However, her definition of neo-Victorianism is somewhat limited by overreliance on Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn’s claim (made in *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*) that the genre only emerged in the 1960s, with the publication of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* and John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. That definition problematically excludes earlier works of metafiction that engage with the Victorian past and the ways in which subsequent generations relate to it. As early as 1933, Rachel Ferguson’s *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts* played with the idea of the unknowability of the Victorian past, featuring, among other metafictional devices, a letter exchange between Charlotte and her teacher; access to the



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letters is withheld from the audience and even Charlotte is unable to decide whether they were love letters, demonstrating Ferguson's commitment to indeterminacy and possibility. Some discussion of critical attention to earlier works of neo-Victorian fiction would have enriched this chapter.

In chapter two, Brindle draws a compelling connection between, on the one hand, diaries and letters, and on the other, the bodies of their authors in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, comparing the layers of clothing that seductively envelop Christabel LaMotte's body with the wrappings and ribbons that protect her letters from Ash. This idea provides continuity between chapters that consider diverse employment of epistolary forms. Chapter three (about fictionalizations of the Victorian occult), chapter four (which considers Margaret Atwood's construction of a diary-like space for Victorian criminal Grace Marks), and chapter six (which discusses the ways in which fictional diaries of ill Victorians parody nineteenth-century beliefs about sanity and wellness) all consider how diary functions as a "textual embodiment of self" (81). Chapter five provides a particularly engaging and insightful analysis of Katie Roiphe's fictionalization of the relationship between Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell, demonstrating how the novel reveals present-day readers to be voyeurs, eagerly imagining the Victorians' sexual secrets to fill textual gaps.

Brindle's book provides a valuable and timely contribution to the field of neo-Victorian studies. It develops ideas expressed in recent works such as Helen Davies's *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets* (2012) and Tatiana Kontou's *Spiritualism and Women's Writing: From the Fin de Siècle to the Neo-Victorian* (2009) (both published by Palgrave Macmillan), applying them to a pervasive but little discussed feature of neo-Victorian fiction. Although the complexity of Brindle's writing style and her use of critical theory may make parts of the book challenging for an undergraduate reader, the text will prove useful for graduate students and specialists working in this field.

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