

**Epistles to the (Neo-)Victorian Past:  
Review of Kym Brindle,  
*Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction:  
Diaries and Letters***

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**Kym Brindle, *Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction:  
Diaries and Letters*  
Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014  
ISBN: 978-1137007155, £55.00 (HB)**

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Reading *Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Diaries and Letters* by Kym Brindle can be rewarding for neo-Victorian scholars if they are willing to suspend their belief in the textual efficacy and authenticity of the long nineteenth century. The author challenges one of the cardinal postulates of historical fiction in general and neo-Victorian novels in particular by claiming the absence of ‘truth’ in most of the ‘Victorian’ letters, diaries and journals used in some neo-Victorian fictional narratives as clues to decoding the past. Adopting an implicit postmodern approach regarding the distorting effects of the past’s textualisation, the author explores the self-conscious inauthenticity of neo-Victorian ‘invented’ accounts appropriating the Victorian textual convention of using letters, diaries, etc. as authentic clues to arrive at the climax of the narrative. Brindle also discusses prominent Victorian examples and contrasts them with the postmodern use of the epistolary form to establish her central argument. If for the Victorians the textual authenticity of the epistolary form was a matter of historical verisimilitude and ethical fidelity, neo-Victorian narratives problematise all textual representations of truth and reality. Her core argument emphasises the fragmentary and elusive nature of these written documents of the past, which confuses our understanding of the Victorians rather than clarifying our ways of perceiving them. The neo-

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Victorian novels she analyses bring out the 'hidden' aspects of the lives and personalities of real and imaginary Victorians by using epistolary devices and often contradict and destabilise the widely popular views on Victorian celebrities, 'the' Victorians in general, and the era as a whole. In fact, if, in Victorian fiction, these kinds of epistolary evidence bring some hidden and necessary truth to light, precipitating the resolution and climax of the novel, in most neo-Victorian novels that use of postmodern techniques applied to the same narrative conventions produces a frustratingly reverse effect. The specific examples of such postmodern ironising of epistolary devices in neo-Victorian novels are minutely discussed in the various chapters of her book. Thus, according to Brindle, her entire book seeks to analyse how "an epistolary approach characterises a neo-Victorian concern with processes of fragmentation, as writers strive to highlight uncertain channels of communication between past and present" (p. 4).

In the 'Introduction: *"Re-write, sign, seal and send"*', the author puts forward the concept of a neo-Victorian 'critical' pastiche, which she describes as an urge to imitate and textually reproduce Victorian writings without falling prey to sentimental nostalgia and fond remembrance. It also does not privilege the mode of pastiche criticised by Fredric Jameson as a mode of historical 'cannibalism' of past styles and attitudes, but seeks to redeem pastiche from its reputation as a flatly imitative and uncritical approach. In other words, Brindle argues that the epistolary devices used by some neo-Victorian writers reproduce the styles and genres of the Victorian past with a sense of critical distance and historical doubt, which underscores the view that "the material traces of the past are fragmentary, incomplete, and contradictory" (p. 4). However, if we continue to dismiss the official and public as well as the private and fictional documentation of the Victorian history as untrue and incomplete, then what exactly is our way of reaching back to the Victorians? If we question the validity of both Victorian metanarratives of self-representation and contesting micronarratives, real and fictional, about that age, then how do we understand and relate to the nineteenth century without any substantial historical documentation to encourage our historical enquiry? Brindle's notion that historical traces of the past are always incomplete and unreliable thus underscores the inauthenticity of *all* textually constructed representations of the real and putative past. For her, the objective reality 'out there' can only be articulated textually through the writer/diarist's

partial and biased perspectives, thereby magnifying the intractable nature of such imaginary verbal re-constructions of the Victorian past.

The following chapter, 'Diary and Letter Strategies Past and Present', minutely compares the epistolary strategies used in various Victorian and neo-Victorian novels. Many of the canonical nineteenth-century examples the author mentions either contain diaries or are written in the epistolary form, like Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1858), Wilkie Collins's three sensation novels, *The Woman in White* (1859-60), *Armadale* (1866) and *The Moonstone* (1868), Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novella *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The comparative neo-Victorian examples include A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen* (1991), Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999), Andrea Barrett's *The Voyage of Narwhal* (2000), Sarah Blake's *Grange House* (2000), James Wilson's *The Dark Clue: A Novel of Suspense* (2001), and John Harwood's *The Ghostwriter* (2005) and *The Séance* (2008). The general conclusion the author arrives at after her comparative study is quite apt. She highlights the positive drive towards the resolution of a crisis or the unravelling of a crime or secret that hidden documents produce in Victorian fiction. This, she notes, happens in both *The Woman in White* and *Dracula*. But she finds just the opposite effect in neo-Victorian fiction, where there is a systematic attempt to disrupt, distort and vitiate the expectations of resolution and closure through such epistolary remains. However, in neo-Victorian novels, there is also a creative urge to re-write the past through these real and invented epistolary voices that simultaneously authenticate and frustrate our understanding of the Victorians. Thus, Brindle's observation regarding the contemporary preoccupation with the secret lives of the Victorians summarises the validity of the use of the epistolary format in these historical narratives, which paradoxically derives from its being called into question:

In all these texts, the diary becomes the hero of pastiche/parody in a Bakhtinian sense, disarming any sense of a secret text within or without fiction and by extension parodying those who hope to find confessional 'truths' in secret documents. (p. 35)

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The title of the next chapter, 'Riddles and Relics: Critical Correspondences in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* and *The Biographer's Tale*', emphasises Byatt's conservative understanding of the relation between creative and critical writings. Byatt, according to Brindle, not only seduces her readers to get involved with the lives of 'mythical' rather than 'real' Victorians through their mystified and enigmatic letters, diaries and biographical accounts, and their visible erasures and censorship, but also "entice[s] fictional scholars from their poststructuralist interpretative paths" (p. 62). In both these novels, fragmented documents and works devised by the author herself re-assert and re-invent Byatt's anti-critical approach in privileging fiction over inert and arid post-structuralist literary theories of (mis)reading the past. Brindle breathes new life into this well-established critical opinion on Byatt's ironic antipathy to post-structuralism as her analyses of Byatt's extant but often damaged letters, diaries and other historical documents privilege the imaginative power of the creative author's genius. Both these fictional documents and their imagined writers are instances of Byatt's authoritative appropriation of a writerly/readerly communion with the Victorian past.

The subsequent chapter, 'Spectral Diarists: Sarah Waters's *Affinity* and Melissa Pritchard's *Selene of the Spirits*', ably proves the use of epistolary devices as a means to assert the element of fraud and deception inherent in the nineteenth-century culture of séance and spiritualism. While these texts highlight the suppressed voices of historical and imaginary female spirit-mediums (Florence Cook and Selina Dawes), they also question the authenticity of the written correspondences produced and circulated by them to forward their professional advancement and personal profit.

Epistolary exchange reproduces public debates about spiritualist authenticity and fraud whilst the diary labours to maintain slender threads of veracity within a textual tangle of documented doubt. In this way, Pritchard sanctions the ghostly by author[ising] doubt that is ultimately vanquished by Waters's authoritative exposure of diarist and text as collusive, falsifying mediums. (p. 90)

While in Pritchard's novel contradictory pastiche letters and diaries confuse the hidden truths of the Florence Cook-William Crookes affair, in Waters's novel the diary of the fraudulent Selina becomes a 'queer' device of same-sex seduction that counters the authority of the panopticon-machine of surveillance and conventional morality that imprisons her.

'A Deviant Device: Diary Dissembling in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*' takes up Atwood's re-reading of the Susanna Moodie journals, especially Moodie's part-invented 'documentation' of the life of the infamous murderess Grace Marks. The accounts left in the novel by Grace and Dr Simon Jordan are also not at all reliable and comprehensive due to the narrators' bouts of trauma, amnesia and self-doubt, which dominate and determine their epistolary representations and self-representations. While the novel succeeds in its neo-Victorian "palimpsestuous vision" (p. 117), foregrounding silenced and deviant perspectives, it fails to prove anything in terms of its historical epistemology, thus occupying a mid-way position between assertion and doubt. In this context, it seems curious to make no mention whatever of the use of the dissembling diary device in Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), which akin to *Alias Grace* figures a female criminal who has every reason to manipulate the evidence in her favour. In Ackroyd's novel, the diary entries purportedly composed by John Cree are actually by his diabolical wife, the murderess Elizabeth Cree, who pretends for a large part of the narrative that they are being written by her husband, thus creating deliberate confusion about her 'true' criminal nature while on trial for her husband's murder. This novel, where the female Jack-the-Ripper, Elizabeth Cree, manipulates the diary form to deflect suspicion from herself, would have made an interesting parallel to Atwood's text, in which the 'innocent' Grace's re-telling of the murder may hide more than it reveals.

The chapter entitled 'Lewis Carroll and the Curious Theatre of Modernity: Epistolary Pursuit in Katie Roiphe's *Still She Haunts Me*' brings to the fore Carroll's obsession with young girls, confessed through his diaries and fictionalised in this novel in typical neo-Victorian epistolary style. Brindle asserts that the way Carroll has been represented by Roiphe affirms the 'iconotropic' attitude of postmodernism to see and read the past in the light of a rigid presentism that seeks to discover a sense of familiarity and identification with the earlier period. She clearly establishes the argument that Carroll's mutilated diary in the novel suppresses his paedophilic and incestuous tendencies, though these gaps and silences in the

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narrative also unlock the secrets of his private domain of sexual instincts before a public readership. Her standpoint is articulated with clarity and precision:

Within a wider context of period fascination, [Roiphe's] book concentrates such fetishism to the paper past of history to investigate how writers present ritualistic discovery and revelation of a past preserved or obfuscated in diary and letter fragments that stage *imagined* access to private Victorians. (p. 119, original emphasis)

The novel, according to Brindle, shows that exact historical truth is elusive and lies in-between the riddles and enigmas of Carroll's Victorian self-representations and our postmodern imaginative revisions of them.

The final chapter, 'Dissident Diarists: Mick Jackson's *The Underground Man* and Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*', continues the debate over the efficacy of neo-Victorian diaries and epistles by analysing the ways in which the deviant and recalcitrant voices of our Victorian ancestors can be traced back – or excavated – through the diary device. The alternative perspectives offered by these dissident characters successfully supplement and challenge the official regimentations of Victorian scientific knowledge and its implementations. The character of the Duke in Jackson's novel seeks to understand the workings of his ageing and diseased body and articulates his psycho-somatic conditions of mental and psychological decay in his eccentric diary entries, which border on madness and non-conformity. Agnes Rackham in Faber's novel also presents an enigmatic and anti-normative account of her private phobias and bodily discontent with the issues of menstruation and childbirth. Sugar, the novelist character in Faber's narrative, constructs a sensational novel out of Agnes's confessional diary that might have been used to incriminate or blackmail her clients later. Brindle lays adequate emphasis on how Sugar selects and appropriates the material of her own narrative from Agnes's diary but does not discuss in detail the implications of the generic change introduced by Sugar. This is worth noting as Faber may be deliberately undermining and ironising both present-day confessional culture and the presumption of ever really understanding the past – in this case Agnes's past – through textual

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traces, instead asserting the prevalence of the imagination in the recreation of the past.

The conclusion, 'Treasures and Pleasures', perceptively adds the insight that the lure of the vanishing written word in our age of heightened and advanced technological communication is a ruse to keep the romance of the past alive in our increasingly automated and mechanical lives. The repeated use of the diary and other epistolary devices in neo-Victorian works do not attempt to heal the ruptures of the Victorian past and the postmodern present. Rather the distance, gaps and fissures between the two ages are magnified and reinforced when present-day writers mainly attempt to (ab)use and appropriate these devices. Whether the past is a verbal universe of 'treasures' enriching the present or the present uses the past for its own pleasurable appropriation, these attitudes are compatible with postmodernism's evergreen 'literary romance' with history.

Brindle has given substantial effort to establishing the precarious and unstable nature of these real and invented historical pastiche records of the Victorian past, which are used by several major neo-Victorian novels to ironically broaden the rupture of the past and the present and to establish the insurmountable barriers of difference between them. Brindle clearly denies the authority of the private and often hidden accounts of the Victorian past as they are mostly tampered with, partisan, and deliberately chaotic and confusing. But in undermining the importance of the pastiche epistolary self-narrativisations of the marginalised voices in history she subtly re-enforces the validity and dominance of the public and official records of Victorian history. The historiographic and metafictional strategy of contesting public documentations of events, people and experiences by the Victorians through these 'invented' voices from the past disempowers and invalidates the rewarding consolations of neo-Victorian fiction in particular and historical fiction in general. This is a piece of criticism that in part refutes one of the most important and recurrent narrative conventions of neo-Victorian fiction and might even prove detrimental to its popularity – unless taken as an informed means of creating critical self-awareness about the limited powers of historical literature to understand, re-interpret and re-use the past. One has to accept that neo-Victorian authors use epistolary formats to affirm the constructive power of minoritarian discourses, a practice that will continue to flourish as no amount of critical dismissal of such stock tendencies can undo the readers' interest in 'invented' and 'imaginary' pastiches from the past. However, Brindle's book is a

significant critical contribution that heightens our suspicion regarding such imagined documents of historical nostalgia in contemporary culture.