Neo-Victorian Girl Sleuths for Today's Middle-Grade Readers: The Enola Holmes (2006-present) and the Wollstonecraft Detective Agency (2015-2018) Novels

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Abstract:
Middle-grade readers, those aged eight to twelve, encounter lessons in feminism through a range of neo-Victorian mystery novels featuring girl sleuths. This essay shines light on two such series that offer exciting adventure narratives couched within biofiction. Jordan Stratford's Wollstonecraft Detective Agency series (2015-2018) gleefully bends chronological dates to allow a young Mary Godwin (later Shelley) to befriend Ada Byron (later Lovelace); the series' four novels infill the thought-lives of these young writers, depicting them as creators of knowledge even during the period of their juvenilia. Nancy Springer's Enola Holmes series (2006-present) uses life-writing to give voice to a Victorian girl's perspectives on the burdens of living in a patriarchal culture. The girls' cases develop a lineage of great Victorian women figures like Mary Somerville, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Florence Nightingale, women who are introduced within the context of their published work. The article further examines how women characters write in code as a way to communicate knowledge seen as deviant by patriarchal systems.

Keywords*:* adaptation, agency, biofiction, children's literature, detective fiction, Enola Holmes Mysteries series, feminism, Ada Lovelace, Mary Shelley, Wollstonecraft Detective Agency series.

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Unlike generations of literature students, today's middle-grade readers – children aged eight to twelve – may be more familiar with Ada Lovelace than they are with her father, George Gordon Lord Byron. The latter merely features as the absent father of the real star, Lovelace, who has become a darling of girl-empowering science and engineering texts for children.[1] Readers who have graduated to chapter books can meet Lovelace in their section of the library in Jordan Stratford's Wollstonecraft Detective Agency series (2015-2018), one of the two series this essay examines. Parents and teachers may guide young readers to these texts to help children develop

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historical context, or the children could pick the novels off the shelves themselves, intrigued by the lively covers and promise of adventure. Either way, the young readers at whom the books are marketed likely know nothing about Lovelace and Shelley before they read the books.[2] The same middle-grade readers will, at most, have a meme-level knowledge of the Sherlock Holmes universe. Netflix's mid-pandemic release of the film *Enola Holmes* (2020), starring Millie Bobbie Brown, introduced the eponymous teen character to a wide audience unencumbered by details about her famous brother. Older viewers enjoyed the film too. As of May 2024, Nancy Springer's Enola Holmes Mysteries series (2006–present) stands at ten instalments. The first volume serves as the hypotext for the film, offering a very different introduction to Sherlock Holmes than the one I had as a child when I watched Jeremy Brett's performance in the Granada TV series with my mother back in the 1980s.

Although they lack knowledge about the biofictional referents and/or fictional hypotexts, today's middle-grade readers are primed for mystery stories. In the children's section of the library, mystery means an adventure with clues. After all, the Harry Potter series remains a rite of passage for young chapter book readers, and every novel in that series is "rooted [in] crime fiction" (Saunders 2020: 149). Children's mystery novels show protagonists able to investigate and decode the adult world, expressing a child's fantasy of power over that hostile space. When Victorian settings join the mix, the child detectives decode not only adult power and its misuses, but also the ethical problems of a past era.

Educators have long relied on historical fiction to enchant young readers into learning history, to "enliven the past" (Parlevliet 2016: 344). Biofiction and historical fiction represent "macro-scale historical events through micro-stories of individuals living in a past period, in a mixture of fact and fiction" (Parlevliet 2016: 344).[3] Such is the case with a twenty-first-century trend in neo-Victorian novels for child and teen readers, specifically texts that introduce the "macro-story" of women's oppression during the Victorian period through the lens of detective narratives dominated by adventurous, ingenious girl sleuths.[4] The list of these books includes the two middle-grade series under consideration here: Jordan Stratford's Wollstonecraft Detective Agency novels and Nancy Springer's Enola Holmes books. Both series complicate their representations of detective fiction by experimenting with aspects of biofiction, whether with counterfactual

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biofiction in the case of the Wollstonecraft Detective Agency novels,[5] or with life-writing and indirect biofiction in the Enola Holmes novels. The first part of this essay examines how the two series negotiate the expectations of historical fiction and biofiction. I then discuss how these series depict writers and writing in ways that defy traditional Victorian patriarchal values. The final part of this essay characterises the agentic girl writers-cum-detectives and their sleuthing in a neo-Victorian context.

1. Making Biofiction Palatable for Young Readers

The Wollstonecraft Detective Agency mysteries bring together two girl figures who never knew each other in real life. Fourteen-year-old Mary Godwin (later fated to become Mary Shelley) and eleven-year-old Ada Byron (better known now by her adult name Ada Lovelace) meet and form a "secret constabulary" (Stratford 2015: 58). The series starts off as biofiction crossed with fictional adaptation, since Stratford's plot in *The Case of the Missing Moonstone* (2015) parallels that of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868).[6] Similarly, in the next instalment of the series, *The Case of the Girl in Grey* (2016), the girl detective-heroines meet polymath Mary Somerville and enact an abridged, bowdlerised version of Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860). In *The Case of the Counterfeit Criminals* (2017), the girls seek to rescue Mary Anning's kidnapped dog. Finally, in *The Case of the Perilous Palace* (2018), the girls visit the nine-year-old Princess Alexandrina Victoria (who invites them to call her 'Drina') in Kensington Palace and help her to locate her missing encoded diary. These cameo appearances deepen the biofictional dimension and introduce readers to a lineage of smart, female intellectuals who challenged Victorian expectations and demonstrated female acumen in the face of patriarchal restrictions.

Stratford takes great liberties with dates to develop his biofictional narrative: both characters are girls when they meet in 1826. In this reality, the girls are only three years apart in age, whereas in real life they were separated by eighteen years, the equivalent of a whole generation. The novels rely on the trope of counterfactual biofiction to elevate the stories of two women writers associated with the Romantic era whose later lives – their adult years stretching into the early Victorian period – are often overlooked. Reading about adult figures and accomplishments would feel too much like a history lesson to the young reader. Instead, the series introduces readers to detectives of their own age, a rapport-building tactic that makes the heroines relatable

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and introduces the women in child-form to accentuate the possibility of their juvenile aspirations. To use Marie-Luise Kohlke's term, the series "infills" the thought-lives of these girls (Kohlke 2013: 8). Though reductive, the experience of meeting Lovelace and Shelley on these terms is refreshing; seeing them as children full of potential removes the biographer's preoccupation with the women as daughters, lovers and wives – their existence in relation to men – and introduces them as fascinating humans worthy of respect. Moreover, the women's complex later lives – especially Lovelace's sophisticated mathematical ideas – may be impenetrable material for child readers. As children, Mary's artistic relational genius balances Ada's mechanical thought processes. Brought together as friends at last, these geniuses have an opportunity to function as a girl-powered team unhampered by the narratives of the men with whom they are historically associated.

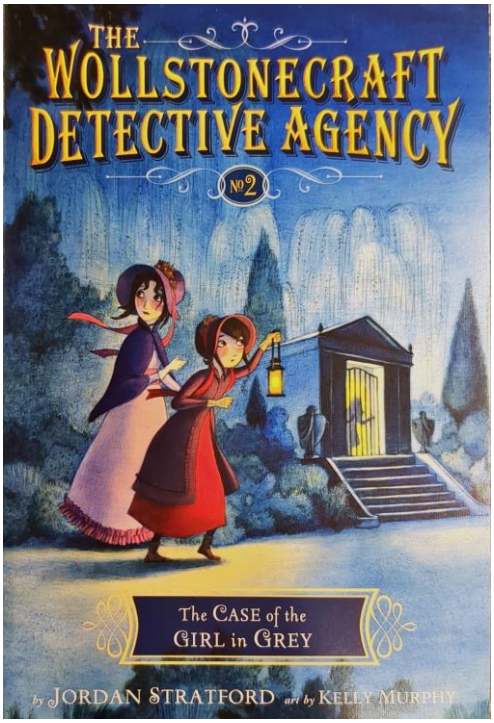

Figure 1. Cover Art by Kelly Murphy in Jordan Stratford, *The Case of the Girl in Grey*, © 2016, Kelly Murphy. Reproduced with kind permission from Kelly Murphy.

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Bearing in mind the target audience, precise dates and biographies are less important than establishing feminist icons in the nineteenth century and cementing a vibrant (if inexact) version of the referents within the readers' sense of the historical timeline of greatness. In the case of biofictions for middle-grade readers, this could be the reader's first encounter with the famous referents, thereby twisting the tenets of "celebrity biofiction" as defined by Kohlke (Kohlke 2013: 7 and *passim*). The celebrity aspect may induce adults in the child readers' lives to introduce them to the series, but the young readers miss out on the thrill of tracking historical accuracy. Instead, the narrative must offer other enticements like adventure and suspense. The original covers of both series emphasise the adventure and agency present in the mysteries. The covers of the Wollstonecraft Detective Agency books tout that Ada and Mary engage in covert work, running through a spooky portrait gallery at night on the cover of *The Case of the Perilous Palace* and sneaking around an eerie, glowing crypt by lantern light on the cover of *The Case of the Girl in Grey*. Illustrator Kelly Murphy captures the girls' cautious alertness, stressing their daring (see **Figure 1**).[7]

Once young readers complete the novels and consume their paratextual information, the names of Lovelace and Shelley will likely remain imprinted on their memories. As with other counterfactual biofictions, the series draws "both explicitly and allusively" on the referents' known histories (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 9). The basic information presented in the series may lead curious readers to read up on further historical context so that they can "approach both text and context, both original and adaptation […] and see the historical, cultural, and literary connotations presented" (Lawrence and Montz 2020: 1). According to Dana E. Lawrence and Amy L. Montz, an adaptation is "connective tissue leading from one text to another, one author to another, one time to another" (Lawrence and Montz 2020: 1). Lawrence and Montz view adaptations – especially adaptations marketed to children – both as an opportunity for young readers to "make personal connections" with the modernised story and an invitation for those readers to explore the source text (Lawrence and Montz 2020: 1). Adapting the women's lives into biofiction prepares young readers to to explore the real women's writings and ideas, even if only in their later years.

To counteract the liberties of biofiction, Stratford includes a rich historical section at the end of each Wollstonecraft Detective Agency novel. Readers expect a paratextual history section in historical fiction; such pieces

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are usually written in the "authoritative voice of the work's twenty-first-century author" (Stetz 2013: 139). In a brief message placed before each story, Stratford directs his young readers to the biographical facts and instructs them on how to value that information: "At the end of the book, there are notes that reveal more about what happened to each of them in real life, so that you can enjoy the history as much as I hope you'll enjoy the story. Because the history bit is *brilliant*!" (Stratford 2015: 1, original emphasis). Paratextual directives like these are a result of the ethical responsibilities of biofiction produced for children. According to Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, "[t]oo good imitations or pastiches can make readers mistake fiction for fact, producing an effect akin to today's 'fake news', albeit in this case 'fake history'" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 41). Since one goal of biofiction for children is to educate, authors must balance counterfactual narratives with a less embellished version of events.

In contrast, the Enola Holmes novels are, in Linda Hutcheon's terms, "palimpsests" of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries (Hutcheon 2006: 8).[8] The children's series is in effect a counterfactual autobiography of a fake Victorian figure from the perspective of a marginalised voice: that of Sherlock Holmes's teen sister. Yes, Holmes is a fictional figure loosely based on the Scottish doctor Joseph Bell, but the Holmes fandom footprint is historical, placing this fiction just a step beyond biofiction. The Sherlock Holmes narrative is better known than most historical Victorian figures' lives. The many internet news articles covering the question of 'Was Sherlock Holmes Real?' suggest that layperson readers have an interest in these keywords.[9] By pairing Enola's exploits with those of Mary and Ada, I concur with Kohlke and Gutleben's assertion that "[s]trict demarcations between historical and biographical fiction […] are no longer tenable" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 15). For the knowledgeable reader acquainted with the iconic Victorian detective, neo-Victorian fiction connected to Holmes provides a similar type of joyful analysis that Kohlke and Gutleben identify as one of the chief delights of biofiction: "the biofictional conflation of real and imagined persons possess an extradiegetic dimension that effects a more intense intersubjective and implicitly ethical relation with the audience in the real world beyond the text" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 40-41). Young readers who are likely unfamiliar with Shelley and Lovelace may have some general cultural knowledge of Sherlock Holmes, some fitful cultural awareness of the

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deerstalker hat, detection, Watson, Benedict Cumberbatch, Robert Downey Jr., or Holmes's powers of deduction.

Enola introduces her story through autobiographical life-writing: her first-person narration emphasises her perspective on Victorian social norms traditionally controlled by men. She starts by chronicling her fourteenth birthday, the day her suffragist mother suddenly left home. Enola's much older, estranged brothers Mycroft and Sherlock descend upon the family estate to investigate Mrs. Holmes's disappearance. Shortly thereafter, they plan a conventional, upper-middle class upbringing for Enola. Disgusted by their plans, Enola enacts – and chronicles – her escape. The first volume ends with her independent residence in London. In subsequent novels, she recovers missing persons and interacts with the poor of London, all while remaining vigilant against her misguided brothers' attempts to find her.

In a bit of street-level public relations, Netflix highlighted Enola's correlation to real women nudged out of the limelight due to patriarchal culture's reverence for their more famous brothers. In September 2020, Netflix

> planted various statues around the UK honoring *real* women whose achievements have been overshadowed by their more famous brothers, including Charles Dickens' sister Frances Dickens and Princess Helena Victoria, sister of King Edward VII. (Ahmed 2020: n.p., original emphasis)

The temporary golden statues stood in various spots around the United Kingdom, hands on hips, staring sourly at their more famous brothers' permanent statues. The social media-friendly stunt asked a global audience to find meaning in Enola's narrative as a glossed, biofictional tribute to women like Frances Dickens, Princess Helena Victoria, Maria Anna Mozart, and Mary Hardy.

Regardless of her nebulous status on the outer limits of biofiction, Enola Holmes offers readers a gateway to both canonical Victorian detective fiction and girl-power adventure novels that pepper the YA market. The series brings to life crisp details of Victorian society. Each novel focuses on a historical injustice: the care of orphans, the lives of homeless Londoners, the ease with which men can confine women to mental asylums, and the extremes to which rich and middle-class families go to prepare girls to become

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respectable wives. Educational historical details abound in the pages of these books.

The historical novel for children is a balance between the familiar and the 'other', the foreign past and the domestic present (see Butler and O'Donovan 2012: 84). In biofiction, the layers multiply since the text also plays with the reader's knowledge of the famous figure. Since these series deal with young readers less familiar with the referents, they must instruct on the historical points while pulling readers into the fabulous realm of 'what if?'.

2. Feminist Portrayals of Neo-Victorian Writers

Authors of biofictional and historical fiction for children teach both historical context and modern values. They habitually rely on anachronistic characters who "reliev[e] modern authors of the necessity of seeming (through their sympathetic protagonists) to endorse unwelcome attitudes" (Butler and O'Donovan 2012: 81). According to Amy L. Montz, "[m]ost often in neo-Victorian young adult texts, the teenage girls are forward-thinking and desirous of freedom" (Montz 2019: 91). Michelle Beissel Heath has called this type of neo-Victorian protagonist "a twenty-first-century girl in disguise" (Heath 2020: 84). The two middle-grade series' protagonists fit this description, and so do the fictionalised versions of the writers they encounter.

Both middle-grade series educate readers in the sexism of the Victorian age. The instruction, designed for young readers, lacks subtlety. All three protagonists voice an enlightened, twenty-first-century outlook on gender inequality. They direct their disdain toward Victorian cultural norms, which is fitting since, according to Louisa Hadley, the "Victorian context does not merely function as backdrop or costume; rather it is integral to the plot and thematic concerns explored" in neo-Victorian texts (Hadley 2010: 18). In historical novels for children, authors commonly depict "sympathetic characters displaying an ahistorically liberal sensibility" to avoid "normaliz[ing] and perpetuat[ing]" the racial and gender inequalities of the past (Butler and O'Donovan 2012: 1). The gender imbalances of the Victorian period make it a setting ripe for adaptation, likely because these gender-related "limitations […] frequently resemble those we have inherited, continued, or renewed" (Heath 2020: 81). These inequalities have long provided beguiling fodder for fiction (see Muller 2012: 116; MacDonald and Goggin 2013: 1).

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Shelley's life offers that ripe material for fiction and fits Kohlke's category of "celebrity biofiction", which "speculates about the inner lives, secret desires, traumas, and illicit pursuits of high-profile public figures, most often writers, poets, and artists" (Kohlke 2013: 7). When readers meet Mary in the Wollstonecraft Detective Agency novels, she is just beginning to blossom as a writer.[10] The first introduction to Mary highlights the value she places on story-telling. As she arrives at the Byron residence, readers gain insight into her thoughts: "But this was not a storybook adventure like the ones Mary read and reread by lantern light until the dim of each night overtook her. This was a real adventure, with herself in a starring role" (Stratford 2015: 24). Mary's character thinks in terms of story, plot, and adventure. When she finds herself in Kensington Palace, she reacts to her author's instincts: "She may never again, she thought, awaken like a princess, so best to note every single detail, should she require it for a story" (Stratford 2018: 157). As a character, she pays attention to words and language.[11] Stratford's authorial 'Notes' describe Mary Shelley as the author of "the world's first science-fiction novel" (Stratford 2018: 177). By presenting the young teen Mary as a proto-author and Ada as a proto-engineer, the series teaches an empowering lesson: children can follow their passions to do influential and creative work.

The series interrogates the impact gender imbalances had on nineteenth-century women writers like Shelley. Issues of possession and control play out in the plots built around knowledge and art produced by women. In the first novel, for example, Ada learns that a married woman's possessions belong to her husband, and she labels the practice as "odd" (Stratford 2015: 103). As previously noted, *The Case of the Girl in Grey* adapts Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, a novel which exemplifies the danger marriage poses to Victorian women and the custody of their possessions (until the passing of the Married Women's Property Act 1882); Stratford's plot too hinges on men's control of a girl's fortune (see Stratford 2016: 50). The focus on married women's loss of personal property highlights another loss of valued content that will matter to the author Mary Shelley: creative credit. Knowledgeable readers will recall that the creative provenance of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) was almost immediately linked to the husband rather than the wife. The attribution of *Frankenstein* has been questioned since its first publication, even after Mary's

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name appeared on the title page in 1821.[12] Conspiracy theories continue to credit Percy Shelley with the work's authorship.

All of the other celebrity biofictional figures are writers as well. In keeping with a privileging of white male stories, the series introduces a teenaged Charles Dickens as well as Percy Bysshe Shelley and John William Polidori, both adults.[13] The other celebrity characters who populate this series are marginalised women writers, all presented as clients in need of the girl detectives' services. Of these clients, Mary Somerville left a legacy in her published work, but Mary Anning's working-class background long prevented her from taking her place within the echelons of esteemed palaeontologists. The absence of published work by Anning bears witness to the inequalities of her time, when male scientists became famous based on the bones she found and identified (see Torrens 1995: 259). Her only piece of published writing is an extract from a letter she wrote to a scientist that he chose to publish (see Torrens 1995: 257). The ways that male figures used Anning's massive correspondence mark her as an underappreciated writer, a woman whose knowledge was appropriated. Anning's society did not make it possible for a working-class woman to earn credentials and publish her work, yet today her likeness and achievements are being touted by a dozen recent children's books.[14] In Stratford's series, the girl detectives must solve a case to protect Anning's professional reputation, when she is pressured to verify fake specimens (see Straftord 2017: 59).

Queen Victoria, a far more influential client, is introduced in her most vulnerable state: during her harshly policed childhood at Kensington Palace. Significantly, Princess Drina requires clandestine help recovering her secret encoded journal. The adult Queen Victoria's celebrity and influence would touch much of nineteenth-century culture, yet the Wollstonecraft Detective Agency mystery hinges on her publishing legacy: her diaries. Extracts from the adult Queen's diaries were already published in her lifetime as *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands from 1848 to 1861* (1868) and *More Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands from 1862 to 1882* (1884), which became immediate best sellers (see Munich 1995: 97). In 2012, the Royal Archives, the Bodleian Library, and ProQuest digitally published 141 volumes of Queen Victoria's personal diaries, including content written in her early teens (see Anon. 2012: n.p.). In Stratford's text, Lord Conroy and Drina's mother read Princess Drina's diary every night, so she has developed a code and draws her reflections in a secret diary, which goes missing. Only

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the Wollstonecraft Detective Agency girls and the loving Baroness Lehzen recognise this loss for the tragedy it is to the princess. Their empathy denotes an awareness of personhood and agency that the Victorian period otherwise denies Princess Drina. The need to keep thoughts secret – the combination of a secret diary and a code – underscores the boundaries placed around girls' thought lives and actions.[15]

Enola Holmes fights a similar battle against the oppressive, derisive brothers who become her guardians when her mother disappears. The brothers belittle Enola's intellect and force her, like Princess Drina, to shift her communications into codes that will circumvent their control. The brothers demonstrate a patriarchal disdain for women's ability to reason. Sherlock wonders if their missing mother's room is a mess because of "the innate untidiness of a woman's mind" (Springer 2020: 43). When faced with Mycroft's instructions about boarding school and dress codes, Enola's first-person narration educates the reader by referring to the lessons she has learned from her mother and her "Rational Dress journals" (Springer 2020: 66). Mycroft ignores Enola's verbal protests, but her first-person narration describes her thoughts, thus educating the reader about "[the corset's] rigidity displacing the internal organs and deforming the ribcage", occasionally even resulting in girls' or women's deaths (Springer 2020: 67). Enola eventually turns her detested corset into her weapon: she stores her dagger, banknotes, and disguises in it and refers to the corset as "my defensive armour" (Springer 2008: 135). Enola takes control of her future as well as her clothing when she escapes her brothers' plans for her. Her narrative argues that in an abusive situation, the girl must take action to remove herself from the oppressive regime. Enola says as much in her autobiographical narration, a narrative feature that the 2020 film adaptation represents by having actor Millie Bobbie Brown break the fourth wall and speak directly to the audience. For example, Enola uses this narrative device to convey to the audience what she has learned through the course of her journey of self-discovery: "[My mother] wanted me to find my freedom, my future, my purpose. I am a detective. I am a decipherer. And I am a finder of lost souls. My life is my own, and our future is up to us" (Bradbeer 2020: 1:56:02-1:56:28). Enola's feminist perspective may seem anachronistic for the Victorian setting, but they fit the modern presentation of autobiographical narratives.

Codes become a space where Enola bests Sherlock in their contest of wits, when Sherlock fails to see a message in flowers that Mrs. Holmes has

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left for Enola (see Springer 2020: 40, 77). Elsewhere Enola reads the threatening message in a bouquet delivered to Mrs. Watson, which Sherlock, also present, fails to recognise as such (see Springer 2008: 67). Enola again triumphs over her brother when she cracks the code of her missing mother's apparel:

> Whereas [Sherlock] had overlooked the significance of my mother's bustle (baggage) and her tall hat (in which I suspected she had carried quite a stout roll of bank notes), I, on the other hand, understood the structures and uses of ladies' underpinnings and adornments. (Springer 2020: 208)

Enola recognises her unique strengths that lie outside her brother's sphere of knowledge: "I knew an entire world of communications belonging to women, secret codes of hat brims and rebellion, handkerchiefs and subterfuge, feature fans and cover defiance" (Springer 2020: 208). Potentially restrictive and oppressive objects of fashion are repurposed into the means of female resistance and subversion.

In Enola's storyworld, the Holmes family produces knowledge about codes. Mrs. Holmes creates a book of ciphers "with her own hands" and gives it to Enola as a parting gift (Springer 2020: 7). In contrast, Sherlock has had his work on ciphers officially published in this storyworld just like Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock. Doyle's character refers to his accomplishment in 'The Adventure of the Dancing Men' (1903) when he boasts, "I am fairly familiar with all forms of secret writings, and am myself the author of a trifling monograph upon the subject, in which I analyze one hundred and sixty separate ciphers" (Doyle 2019: n.p.). Inside her separate storyworld in Springer's series, Enola reads her brother's monograph. She learns from it and later applies her knowledge to decipher Lady Cecily's Mason cipher, which the abused teenager has painted in disappearing ink onto a pink fan (see Springer 2008: 46).

Enola also authors coded messages, in a nod to the danger attributed to the uncontrolled thoughts and desires of women in her Victorian setting. Mrs. Holmes's education has equipped Enola to think in terms of ciphers. The missing mother's parting birthday gift, after all, includes a book on the language of flowers, which the two use to communicate in, and the handmade book of ciphers (see Springer 2020: 6). Subsequently, Enola reaches out to

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her mother by placing encoded messages in *The Pall Mall Gazette* and other periodicals (see Springer 2020: 207). The protagonist faces the added challenge that she has two genius brothers trying to crack her codes, but she has no other way to communicate with her parent. As Enola prepares the messages, she explains the multiple steps of her encryption for the reader's benefit. In each novel, Enola relies on her ability to communicate with codes and crack new ciphers. Enola's abilities point to a sort of female-only code, the deciphering of which is restricted to female readers in the text, providing a feminist twist on Holmes's decoding activities in Doyle stories like 'The Adventure of the Dancing Men'.[16]

Celebrity biofictional figure and author Florence Nightingale appears in the fifth novel as another character who relies on coded messages. In the end it comes out that Nightingale wrote in a code embroidered on women's undergarments to argue for government change while circumventing official channels; she needed a clandestine way to communicate with her supporters because the army resented her so-called interference "as a woman and a civilian" (Springer 2011: 90). Here again codes become a woman's way to communicate knowledge seen as deviant by patriarchal systems.

The real Nightingale has gained renewed attention for her persuasive work with data visualisation. In the years after her labours in Crimea, Nightingale used "line diagrams […] line graphs, and scatterplots" to build her arguments about hygiene for the wounded; she also designed forms for gathering data in a routine way (Franklin 2002: 338). Her *Notes on Nursing* (1859) became a standard nursing textbook in the nineteenth century. She also produced an extensive correspondence. In Springer's novel, the character Nightingale uses a social convention of upper-class invalidism to achieve what Virginia Woolf terms "a room of one's own" (Woolf 2020: n.p.). Woolf references the icon of Nightingale several times in her famous essay of the same name. At one point, Woolf conjures up a version of Nightingale that sounds particularly sympathetic to the difficulties of women writers: "as Miss Nightingale was so vehemently to complain,--'women never have an half hour...that they can call their own'--she was always interrupted" (Woolf 2020: n.p., original ellipses and dashes). Here Woolf's Nightingale repudiates cultural expectations that scorned women's intellectual work when it clashed with social and domestic responsibilities.

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Springer's Nightingale has found a loophole to allow her more time to write: she fakes invalidism and finds freedom in her so-called sick room. In the course of her investigation, Enola finds and decodes Nightingale's embroidered cipher left over from the Crimean War. The girl detective approaches Nightingale for information. Although Nightingale's home is bustling with activity, Nightingale herself remains out of reach in a cloistered upstairs room. She lives like a hermit and only rarely sees visitors. After being rebuffed, Enola writes a message in Nightingale's own code to persuade Nightingale to admit her. Once she reaches Nightingale's room, Enola observes the mark of the older woman's authorship: a bed that also serves as a "cubby-hole desk"; hands "bent into crescents from constant writing"; and an ultramodern electric lamp so that she can write through the night (Springer 2011: 88-89). Enola comes to understand that Nightingale fakes chronic illness so that she can avoid social niceties that would impede her work.

This interaction with Nightingale contains tropes of both indirect biofiction and counterfactual biofiction. The artistic license evidently warrants extra warnings since Springer's only 'Author's Note' of the series appears in this volume to explain the counterfactual presentation of Florence Nightingale. Instead of suffering from a disabling bout of brucellosis, this fictional Nightingale is a sprightly mastermind who eschews the burdens of social etiquette expected of privileged women so that she can devote herself to the work of social reform. The fictional Nightingale becomes a rebellious figure, one who has thwarted the limitations that dog Enola.[17]

Like Nightingale, Enola develops her own rules to overcome the egregious sexism in her society. Readers approach lessons about gender roles more objectively because the Victorian setting is several steps away from their own culture. Margaret D. Stetz has identified the motivation behind mixing children's reading with neo-Victorian depictions of gender bias: "feminist writers […] have been appropriating Victorian settings, situations, and characters for reasons bound up with their own moral imperatives, and […] have done so in the service of political education and advocacy" (Stetz 2013: 143). By teaching young readers to empathise with the oppressed but capable neo-Victorian protagonists, the novels develop a sensitivity in those same readers. The didactic experience may make them more likely to question gender oppression in their own time or empower them with a sense of feminist history. Such narratives potentially "inculcate[e]" young readers with "feminist principles and perspectives" (Stetz 2013: 150).

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Some of the action in these detective novels pushes the girls' agency into the realm of the counterfactual. Louisa Hadley finds equivalent inaccuracies in modern film adaptations of nineteenth-century novels; in attempting to please the modern reader, neo-Victorian film narratives "transgress the social and moral mores" of the Victorian era (Hadley 2010: 12). The Wollstonecraft Detective Agency girls, for instance, chase criminals in a hot air balloon and break into Kensington Palace in the middle of the night. It is this very agentic approach to the girl detectives that makes the "'retro' accessible" (Mitchell 2010: 3). This final aspect of the readers' feminist education is deeply enmeshed with the girls' detective work.

3. The Agentic Girl Detective in Neo-Victorian Detective Fiction

In both series, the girls name themselves and follow their calling with determination and wit. Ada and Mary brand their "secret constabulary" in honour of Mary's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft (Stratford 2015: 58), because of the ideas set forth in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792); it was that text that taught the girls to aspire to gender equality. As the Wollstonecraft Detective Agency, they highlight the banner of their feminism and their identity as detectives. Enola identifies her "life's calling: being a perditorian" (Springer 2007: 48). The term does not exist in the Oxford English Dictionary, but Enola means it to show that she is a finder of people and things. The act of self-christening in each case indicates to the reader that the characters are treading new ground in their nineteenth-century settings.[18]

Neo-Victorian middle-grade series rely on the tropes of the Victorian detective story to demonstrate the intellectual acuity of the girls involved in the mystery challenge. For example, Maryrose Wood's Incorrigible Children of Ashton Place novels (2010-2018) each narrate a mystery solved by a plucky young governess, Penelope, and her three charges. Wood's intrusive narrator at one point explains that

> Penelope had never heard of Sherlock Holmes, of course, for in a fictional sense he had not been born yet, but she was a clever girl and no stranger to logic herself. That is why she realized that her powers of deduction would come in useful when trying to figure things out. (Wood 2010: 251)

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As Wood's narrator indicates, Sherlock Holmes has become an ur-text for the neo-Victorian setting and the intelligent detective-hero/ine.

Doyle's scientifically minded detective has outshone some of his equally deductive predecessors and moulded expectations about subsequent sleuths.[19] Merrick Burrow explains that "[i]n the classic detective story the crime is principally significant as the occasion for a demonstration of the detective's acumen" (Burrow 2019: 18). Sherlock Holmes uses induction, abduction, but mostly deduction at various times in his career as a consulting detective (see Wainwright 2018: n.p.).[20] A well-known example of Sherlock's reasoning abilities appears in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) when he deduces that Dr. Watson has been a wounded military doctor in Afghanistan by observing the clues of his new roommate's appearance (see Doyle 2003: 18). In 'A Scandal in Bohemia' (1891) he deduces within moments that Watson has returned to medical practice and that he has employed a careless servant: "[Watson] could not help laughing at the ease with which [Sherlock] explained his process of deduction" (Doyle 2004: 265). Like Sherlock, a girl detective demonstrates deductive reasoning when she "mak[es] an inference from information which is given" (Evans 2013: n.p.). Sherlock Holmes's unimpassioned deduction presents a recognisable marker of intelligence. When the crime-solving habits of Doyle's character are transferred to female protagonists, readers recognise the highly deductive reasoning that marks the protagonist as a mind worthy of respect. Even readers who have not yet read the hypotext can decode this characterisation. The Wollstonecraft Detective Agency novels expose Ada's deductions to celebrate her genius. Ada herself explains it thus: "Wondering, guessing, trying, looking at things, sorting variables, guessing again. That's how we did it. Science" (Stratford 2015: 179).

After naming their calling, the girls need to develop their detective habits. When it comes to deductive reasoning, Enola and Ada cleverly manage to isolate the main clues and questions. Enola uses the act of writing to track her control of the data. She shows Sherlock her list of questions about her mother's disappearance, and he applauds her ideas: "You have certainly covered the salient points" (Springer 2020: 58). Enola's deductive strategies typically involve writing lists of established facts and possibilities. These lists appear in a more elaborate handwriting-esque typeface on the page. Writing becomes a necessary part of her detective work. Enola's list of "salient" questions aligns with Ada's habit of reviewing the facts that the girls have so

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far collected. Such lists demonstrate a logical approach to solving the missing person mystery at hand. They also serve the purpose of focusing the child reader who may need a reminder about the clues amidst all of the fascinating costume changes and intrigue.

Female detectives operate a less flashy, more covert form of investigation in a nod to the domestic settings of the referents' own novels. For instance, in the case of Bella Ellis's *The Vanished Bride: A Brontë Sisters Mystery*, the three sisters relish the irony of their situation as "three invisible lady detectors seeking out the truth" (Ellis 2020: 17). The women conform to their society's expectations of proper, dignified, middle-class women, and their challenge is that they must access clues and witnesses within the limitations society places on their movements. The women possess specialised knowledge, however. Unlike the blundering police who have missed relevant clues, the women detectives here, and the girls of the Enola Holmes and the Wollstonecraft Detective Agency mysteries, are able to gain access to female witnesses' homes and their guarded thoughts. This approach to detection reflects the domestic sphere where the real Brontës set their fiction. For example, Jane Eyre observes details specific to women when she considers the mystery situated on Thornfield's third-story room. The clues she observes (but fails to connect) include domestic observations: the eerie laugh and Grace Poole's tankard of porter and work equipment (see Brontë 1996: 114, 117, 168).

The neo-Victorian detective narratives revel in the irony of culturally silenced, sheltered women tunnelling through conventions to solve mysteries that remained unfathomable to the freer-moving male investigators. Enola's first-person, autodiegetic narration emphasises her every observation, including clues her brothers overlook. The novels read like very personal first-person accounts of the events that happen to her. This approach allows her space to share her discoveries with the reader-audience since she has no side-kick – no Watson – to record her accomplishments or to listen to her explanations. Enola has become her own chronicler, and the audience has replaced Watson in his other role as spectator. Compare this to Doyle's choice to have Watson tell Holmes's story as a homodiegetic narrator dependent on Holmes's revelations: Enola's observations feel more immediate and give voice to a traditionally overlooked category of Victorian sleuth.

Enola patterns some of her personal narrative on the pattern set by the chronicling work of Dr. Watson. She has read and been influenced by *A Study*

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in Scarlet, in which an admiring Dr. Watson embeds a list of the areas in which Sherlock Holmes was "exceptionally well-informed" (Doyle 2003: 14). After paraphrasing Watson's list of Sherlock's strengths, Enola lists her own "dismal" list of schoolgirl abilities: "able to read, write, do sums" (Springer 2020: 29-30). By the end of her first mystery, she has risen in her own self-esteem. Her new Watson-esque list of accomplishments emphasises her nuanced abilities, the ones Sherlock does not possess.[21] She thinks of her knowledge as a ticket into spaces denied to Sherlock: "I could go places and accomplish things Sherlock Holmes could never understand or imagine, much less do" (Springer 2020: 209). The obscure lives and messages of women have been put front and centre in this narrative about decoding the undervalued and the overlooked.

4. Conclusion: Measuring Truth in Biofiction

These two children's series promote a truth valuable to modern sensibilities: girls demonstrate intellectual and agentic potential in any era. Stratford's and Springer's biofictions align with girl power priorities. Today girl power, while not ubiquitous, is a formidable force in pop culture. The novels under review carry that trend into reclaimed Victorian settings.

By forming detective stories around the biofictional referents Mary Shelley and Ada Lovelace, Stratford conveys the rhetorical position that girls' intellectual light has always shone despite oppression and discrimination. The Wollstonecraft Detective Agency series creates an imagined look into the girls' childhoods, filling in their voices and feelings beyond what is known in fact-based biographical accounts. The fictional matter allows for a more nuanced appreciation of what girl genius might have looked like in the Victorian era. This fictional excavation aligns with Kylie Mirmohamadi's ideas that authors of biofiction defend

> the creative act of fictionalising to uncover deeper, beyond factual, truths, while simultaneously appealing to the authority of traditional forms of biographical knowledge to bolster and authenticate their fictional representations. (Mirmohamadi 2020: 50)

Michael Lackey also promotes the value of biofiction's truth factor when he writes that "biofiction transports readers into the world of agential

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possibilities so that they can create themselves into something unique, original, and new" (Lackey 2022: 16). Readers can find transformative truth represented in these two middle grade series, specifically when they examine the series' rhetorical positioning of biofictional women and girl characters. The imagined women and girls – from Florence Nightingale and Mary Anning to Ada Byron and Mary Godwin – introduce themselves as the self-determining agents of their own stories. These assertive characters inspire young readers to take confidence in their own genius, whatever form that might take. The biofictions under consideration here foster girl empowerment and suit the priorities of parents, mentors, and children who value that worldview.

By inventing an equally clever, unconstrained sister for Sherlock Holmes, Springer's series solves the mystery of what it would have taken for a girl to have succeeded in his profession and communicates her protagonist's subversive messages of self-determinism and equality. By reimagining the biographies of famous writers as girls, the Wollstonecraft Detective Agency novels seek to uncover the solution to another mystery: how might agentic Victorian girls have written about (escaping) their own oppression?

Notes

1. Nearly a dozen children's books about Ada Lovelace have been published since 2015. These include Laurie Wallmark's *Ada Byron Lovelace and the Thinking Machine* (2015), Diane Stanley and Jessie Hartland's *Ada Lovelace: Poet of Science* (2016), Fiona Robinson's *Ada's Ideas* (2016), Zafouko Yamamoto's *Ada Lovelace* (2018), M. J. Mouton's *Ada Wants to Fly* (2019), and Emily Calandrelli's detective book set in the twenty-first century, *Ada Lace on the Case* (2017).
2. When referring to the historical women, I call them by their adult names, Shelley and Lovelace. Like the series' narrator, I refer to the girl characters as Mary and Ada.
3. Margaret D. Stetz has observed that the book marketplace and librarians shelving the middle-grade novels eschew the term 'neo-Victorian', instead labelling texts in this category simply as "historical fiction" (Stetz 2012: 340).
4. The market has embraced a noticeable twenty-first-century trend in female neo-Victorian detectives and a general de-gendering of canonical detection. Gail Carriger's steampunk Finishing School series (2013-2015) about a Victorian

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finishing school for spies revolves around a new mystery in each instalment. Fans of Enola Holmes might later reach for a YA option like Brittany Cavallaro's Charlotte Holmes novels, which follow a modern YA/new adult version of the detective at her Connecticut boarding school, before she later moves on to Oxford. Adult readers have several Holmesian options: Sherry Thomas's Lady Sherlock series (2016-2020) casts Charlotte Holmes in the detective role; Anna Elliot and Charles Verley's Sherlock and Lucy series (2014-2020) pairs Doyle's detective with his equally clever daughter; Vicky Delany's Sherlock Holmes Bookshop Mystery series blends Holmesian pastiche with twenty-first-century cozy murder investigations; Laurie R. King's Russell & Holmes series introduces Mary Russell, a teenager who grows into womanhood while solving cases with the elderly detective (1994-2024).

5. Jerome de Groot uses the term 'counterfactual history' for a category of narratives that allow "an alternate historical space to be imagined" (de Groot 2010: 172). These novels ask the reader to "forget what they know" and consider "What if? history" (de Groot 2010: 173).
6. Interestingly, critics generally recognise *The Moonstone* as "the first great detective novel" since Collins's narrative focuses on the investigation following the titular jewel's disappearance and introduces a detective hero (Priestman 2003: n.p.).
7. The Enola Holmes narratives also include the requisite scenes of action. Enola learns to carry a dagger disguised as a brooch, and she uses it to fend off a garrotter in *The Case of the Left-Handed Lady* (2007). Elsewhere she escapes detection by jumping across rooftops and clambering up trees. Perhaps the greatest thrill comes from the way Enola masks herself to gain entrance to otherwise forbidden settings. She rejects dressing like a man and always finds a way to disguise herself as a woman to evade her brothers or access a witness. Her first-person narration informs readers just how illicit her behaviour is, since being caught would result in her capture by the sometimes murderous villains or the brothers who want to imprison her in a boarding school.
8. Linda Hutcheon challenges readers to think of adaptations as "inherently 'palimsestuous' works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts" (Hutcheon 2006: 6). Enola's world is layered on top of a more familiar one: that of Doyle's London. Part of the joy of exploring Enola's world is contained in the anticipation of running into familiar figures from Doyle. Indeed, Enola encounters and describes Dr. Watson, Mrs. Watson, Mrs. Hudson, Inspector Lestrade, and her brother's famous home during her investigations. While the Wollstonecraft Detective Agency novels parallel the plot points of Wilkie

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Collins's novels, Enola's plot does not parallel Doyle's prior texts. The plot is very much her own. Instead, Enola's story overlays Doyle's adapted Sherlock Holmes oeuvre and occasionally encounters beloved vestiges from it.

9. Data from Google Trends shows that there were internet searches for "was Sherlock Holmes real" throughout 2020, with a spike when the Enola Holmes movie aired on Netflix in September 2020 (Google Trends 2021: n.p.). Also, a Doyle descendant's personal narrative attests to encountering fans who believe Holmes really walked Baker Street (see Pooley 2021: n.p.). Richard Pooley repeats the T. S. Eliot quote more often found in Doyle scholarship than in studies on Eliot: "Perhaps the greatest of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries is this: that when we talk of him we invariably fall into the fancy of his existence" (Eliot qtd. in Pooley 2021: n.p.).
10. At fourteen, the real Mary Shelley suffered from terrible eczema and a simmering discontent with her stepmother. Around this time, she was sent away from the family's London home for an extended stay at a boarding school in Ramsgate, followed by a visit of nearly a year with a family in Dundee, Scotland. None of these details enter into the Wollstonecraft Detective Agency novels. Little attention has been given to Mary Shelley's childhood writing because of what has been called an "archival dearth" (Hewitt 2014: n.p.).
11. Mary's character rolls words around in her mind, testing them and developing a fluency with them that will later aid her future writerly trajectory. For example, she internally seeks the right word for a situation even when she does not need to speak it: "The word 'disaster' presented itself to Mary. It does a good job of describing things like earthquakes and mudslides and tornadoes, but it was simply not up to the task of describing Ada's bedroom. Mary suddenly felt sorry for the word" (Stratford 2015: 37). Elsewhere she assesses terms like "secret" (Stratford 2015: 58).
12. The first publication of *Frankenstein* in 1818 was anonymous, but the reviewer Walter Scott attributed it incorrectly to Percy Bysshe Shelley. Mary's name only appeared on the 1821 French edition and the later 1823 English edition.
13. While Percy Bysshe Shelley is a character in the Wollstonecraft Detective Agency novels, he plays the unromantic role of the girls' tutor. He enters the narrative as a friend of Ada's father, and the series avoids any hint of romance between the adult tutor and the teenage Mary.
14. Twenty-first-century children's books about Mary Anning include the following: Sally M. Walker's Mary *Anning Fossil Hunter* (2000); Don Brown's *Rare Treasures: Mary Anning and Her Remarkable Discoveries* (2003); Brooke Hartzog's *Ichthyosaurus and Little Mary Anning* (2004); Shirley Raye

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Redmond's *The Dog that Dug for Dinosaurs* (2012); Monica Kulling's *Mary Anning's Curiosity* (2017); Anna Claybourne's *Mary Anning Fossil Hunter* (2017); Kay Barnham's *History VIPs: Mary Anning* (2017); and Linda Skeers' *Dinosaur Lady: The Daring Discoveries of Mary Anning* (2020).

15. The novels also educate about restrictions on the girls' mobility and freedom. When Mary informs Ada that a girl cannot simply walk into a newspaper office unchaperoned without expecting to be thrown out, Ada is outraged: "That's not fair!" she says (Stratford 2015: 76). When faced with a sixteen-year-old client who is engaged and about to be married, Mary recoils.

> 'You are to be married?' interrupted Mary.
> 'Yes, that's what "fiancé" means.'
> 'At sixteen?' […]
> Mary supposed, being fourteen, that her own coming-out would be less than two years away, at which point she would be introduced to society and expected to entertain offers of marriage. At once, all concern for the case at hand was replaced with a feeling of dread. (Stratford 2015: 76-77)

Mary's discomfort with the idea of being resigned to marriage at such a young age may have been a common, repressed worry for Victorian girls.

16. The author wishes to thank Charlotte Wadoux for suggesting this idea during the initial edit of the article.
17. A disability studies reading would identify the non-disabled woman, appropriating the accommodations of disability, as an injustice perpetrated by a privileged body.
18. The series gives significant attention to Enola's encoded name, given to her by her mother to remind her daughter that she "will do very well on [her] own" (Springer 2020: 6). Although a relation to one of the biggest celebrities of her society, Enola draws more of her identity from her absent mother than she does from her detective brother. The mother's role in naming and shaping Enola emphasises the matrilineal inheritance of feminist thought, one that young readers might also feel as they learn the bare facts of suffragist and dress reform history through the novels.
19. For example, Edgar Allan Poe's detective stories of the 1840s introduced C. Auguste Dupin who solved "enigmatic crimes [through] intellectual acuity" (Burrow 2019: 17).
20. Inductive reasoning is "thinking which permits us to go from specific observations to general conclusions" (Feeney 2018: n.p.). Inductive reasoning features in detective fictions and dramas when investigators or profilers observe

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the mode of murder and then hypothesise about the past conditions of the unknown criminal based on the evidence of the crime.

21. Enola's final list reflects on how her first adventure has changed her: "Once upon a time […] I had made a mental list of my talents, comparing them unfavorably with [my brother's]. Now, riding in a London cab instead of on a bicycle, I found myself compiling in my mind a different list of my talents and abilities. I knew things Sherlock Holmes failed even to imagine" (Springer 2020: 208).

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