Neo-Victorian Adventures for Young Readers: Review of Sonja Sawyer Fritz and Sara K. Day's *The Victorian Era in Twenty-First Century Children's and Adolescent Literature and Culture*

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While neo-Victorian studies has examined representations and revisitations of gender, sexuality, class, colonialism, urbanity, science, material culture and other topics in a range of media and has incorporated a diverse set of theoretical and methodological approaches, it has mostly done so with respect to texts for adult audiences. Despite a wealth of relevant material, academics in the field have largely bypassed fiction for children and young adults. Similarly, children's literature criticism has rarely adopted the paradigms of neo-Victorian studies. Sonya Sawyer Fritz and Sara K. Day's timely edited collection *The Victorian Era in Twenty-First Century Children's and Adolescent Literature and Culture* (2018) addresses this desideratum and establishes a fruitful dialogue between the two areas of research. As Claudia Nelson rightly notes in her foreword to the volume, children's literature deserves more attention from scholars in neo-Victorian studies. She argues that

> while scholars of neo-Victorian literature have evinced considerable interest in literary children, overall more attention has gone to child characters in adult literary fiction than to neo-Victorianism as presented to young readers, and

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> scholarship of the latter type has tended to focus on individual texts or series. (p. xiii)

Indeed, the most frequently quoted sources on childhood and neo-Victorianism are still the contributions in Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben's edited collection *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics* (2011) and Anne Morey and Nelson's 'The Secret Sharer: The Child in Neo-Victorian Fiction', the introduction to their 2012 *Neo-Victorian Studies* special issue on childhood. While these publications outline crucial parameters of neo-Victorian childhoods, neither of them focuses explicitly on children's literature.

In their introduction, Sawyer Fritz and Day turn the spotlight on "the place of the Victorian in contemporary works for children and adolescents" (p. 2). Making reference to Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's seminal study *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (2010) and Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss's edited collection *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations* (2014), they clarify that the focus of their volume is in fact the neo-Victorian. The collection does not draw a sharp line between children and adolescents; rather both groups are subsumed under the category of 'young readers'. Sawyer Fritz and Day carefully scrutinise the unique facets and potentials of children's and young adult (YA) neo-Victorian fiction without essentialising the child, adolescent or adult as reader or fictional character. In contrast to neo-Victorian fiction for adults, they argue, "the nature of the text's representation of the child, as well as the implied reader's relationship with the fictional child, is further complicated" in works for young readers, because the latter

> are asked not just to reflect upon or consume with interest the nineteenth-century characters and their situations, but to identify with the Victorian child as imagined in the text and, often, to gain some new perspective on their own environment by learning something about the lives of their Victorian (or Victorian-inflected counterparts). (p. 3)

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Sawyer Fritz and Day rightly explain that this does not mean "that there is a significant difference between appropriations of the Victorian in works for young people and works for adults", but rather "that many of the foundational ideas of neo-Victorianism apply to themselves in children's and young adult literature in productive and compelling ways, enriching both fields of study" (pp. 3-4). Accordingly, the editors' major aim for the collection is to explore which purposes such an engagement with the Victorian period fulfils, and what type of commentary such texts offer young readers on the role the Victorians continue to play in twenty-first century culture (p. 2). With reference to various contemporary appropriations of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books, Sawyer Fritz and Day give us a preview of what some of these functions may be. For example, they suggest that young readers can confront contemporary issues of race, class, or gender through the historical lens and critique provided by neo-Victorian literature. Furthermore, they indicate that neo-Victorian fiction for young readers displays "efforts to grapple with the upheaval and disruption that characterizes childhood and adolescence today" (p. 13). Unfortunately, Sawyer Fritz and Day do not explain what exactly these upheavals and disruptions are, although many of the contributors make more tangible statements. Beginning with an analysis of Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000) and closing with a piece on Gail Carringer's YA series *Finishing School* (2013-2015), the twelve chapters are arranged chronologically. This structure is intended to highlight how the neo-Victorian impetus in these works has "grown and developed over the course of the past two decades" (p. 13).

Brett Carol Young's opening essay '"The Great Change in Human History": The Recasting of the Fall of Man as the Crisis of Faith in *His Dark Materials*' departs from the reading of Philip Pullman's famous trilogy as a work of fantasy and follows the recent incentive to consider it as an early example of steampunk. Young plausibly interrogates how Pullman employs and deconstructs the literary concept of the fall of man as well as the historical crisis of faith that affected the Victorians in view of massive scientific and technological advancements. She argues that this technique allows Pullman "to create an argument against the doctrines of the Church and for a culture of self-faith and acquired knowledge" (p. 33). While Pullman's theme of religion has been subject to much scholarly

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commentary, Young adds an original reading of the trilogy that views it as a focus of a neo-Victorian framework.

In '"What's in the Empty Flat?" Specular Identity and Authorship in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*' Maryna Matlock challenges the assumption that Gaiman's famous children's novella from 2002 is a mere retelling of Carroll's *Alice* books. She proposes that *Coraline* equally evokes numerous books of the '*Alice* type' (p. 38). According to Matlock, such books were written by women writers in the Victorian period to evoke and to take issue with Carroll's representation of femininity. Examples include Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa the Fairy* (1869) and Juliana Horatia Ewing's *Amelia and the Dwarfs* (1870). In an attentive close reading of Coraline's journey, Matlock reconstructs how Gaiman "not only challenges the suffocating scripts that confined and defined the Victorian woman writer but also breaches the ideological legacies that continue to haunt contemporary representations of female adolescence" (p. 39). Matlock's chapter thus accentuates the unique hybrid temporality of neo-Victorian fiction for young readers.

Sonya Sawyer Fritz moves on to the medium of animated film in her subsequent chapter 'In Space No One Can Hear You Cry: Late Victorian Adventure and Contemporary Boyhood in Disney's *Treasure Planet*'. Sawyer Fritz demonstrates that this space opera, a loose adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* from 2002, which disappointed at the box office, is nevertheless a remarkable neo-Victorian text. She examines how *Treasure Planet* foregrounds various aspects of the contemporary 'crisis' of boyhood, such as the absence of fathers and the lack of emotional support systems, and, in doing so, "complicate[s] the generic values of the original work" (p. 56). Whereas Stevenson's Jim Hawkins grows up on his own by surviving various dangerous and violent adventures that the pirates throw him into, his eponymous successor forms meaningful connections with them, first and foremost with a fatherly John Silver. *Treasure Planet* therefore appears to be surprisingly more didactic and moralistic than its Victorian pretext.

The fourth chapter, Amy Hicks's 'Are We Not (Wo)Men? Gender and Animality in Contemporary Young Adult Retellings of H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*', focuses on Megan Shepherd's *The Madman's Daughter* (2013) and Ann Halam's *Dr. Franklin's Island* (2002). These two

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YA appropriations of the famous science fiction novel adopt Wells's investigation of the instable boundary between humans and animals with a neo-Victorian twist. Taking her cue from human-animal studies and ecofeminism, Hicks illustrates that by including two female focalisers, who are experimented upon, "[b]oth novels reinforce humanist notions about women's connection to nature by coding feminine characteristics […] as animalistic", but "ultimately reframe devalued feminine and animalistic aspects as valuable and destabilize the human-animal hierarchy" (p. 73). In this way, Hicks convincingly suggests, both works articulate a feminist agenda and participate in the neo-Victorian trend to give presence and voice to the absent or marginalised female characters of Victorian literature.

In 'Steampunk Kim: The Neo-Victorian Cosmopolitan Child in Philip Reeve's *Larklight*', Chamutal Noimann draws attention to postcolonial dimensions of neo-Victorian adolescent literature. Her point of departure is the *Reichsbildungsroman*, a nineteenth-century genre in which

> the child protagonist matures firmly within the context of the empire, educated often by the dual cultures within which he lives, outside of any structured educational system, and develops into an adult that combined elements from both the dominant British culture and the culture it rules. (p. 88)

Two prototypical examples, Noimann tells us, are Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *Kim* (1901). In her discerning analysis, she demonstrates how Reeve's *Larklight* (2006) perpetuates Kipling's character development but articulates a more radical critical stance toward the Empire, for instance, by highlighting its cruelty towards other cultures and including female characters who struggle with its ideology of female domesticity and subordination.

The following chapter, A. Robin Hoffman's '*The Dangerous Alphabet* and the Dark Side of Victorian Domesticity', returns to the work of Neil Gaiman, this time to his aptly named alphabet book from 2008. Hoffman offers a sophisticated reading of *The Dangerous Alphabet*, acknowledging that alphabet books usually have a double audience: today the parent who reads it out to the listening child and, in its earlier form, the Victorian female pedagogue who was to educate children in domestic settings. Hoffman analyses in which ways and by what means *The*

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Dangerous Alphabet operates as "the *cri de coeur* of an unwilling 'Angel in the House'", "a parody of pedagogy that can stir both laughter and sympathy by prompting modern-day parents to literally articulate their Victorian predecessors' plight" (p. 106). Hoffman thus provides a welcome alternative interpretation to the predictable reviews that judged Gaiman's work as too frightening or confusing for children.

Hoffman's essay is followed by Victoria Ford Smith's contribution '*Return of the Dapper Men* and the Nonsense of Neo-Victorian Literature', which explores the afterlives of nonsense, another established Victorian genre for children. Ford Smith skilfully reads Jim McGann and Janet Lee's *The Dapper Men* (2010), a richly intertextual work which combines elements of fairy tale, fantasy, graphic novel and picture book, as a work that is not so much concerned with depicting childhood as such but rather approaches it from a critically informed metaperspective. She traces how McGann and Lee expose "the instability of childhood as a construct" (p. 125), which underlies the works of Lewis Carroll and J. M. Barrie. Nonsense, she suggests, serves as an effective tool *in The Dapper Men* to dismantle their ideology and fetishisation of childhood.

The next piece, Elizabeth Ho's 'Asian Masculinity, Eurasian Identity, and Whiteness in Cassandra Clare's *Infernal Device* Trilogy', enters the postcolonial terrain again. Focusing on the representation of Jem Carstairs, a Euroasian boy from Shanghai and one of the main protagonists of Clare's trilogy from 2010-2013, Ho investigates the problematic implications of the series' combination of a post-racial agenda with a nineteenth-century setting that obscures the historical reality of racism. She presents a meticulous textual analysis and equally considers the ways in which the fan community has responded to Jem's Chinese heritage. She illustrates that the series "authorizes fans to, consciously or not, whitewash the Eurasian characters of the series such as Jem" (p.154), because it lacks critical engagement with nineteenth-century racial politics.

The following two essays are concerned with the afterlives of the works of the Brontë sisters. In 'Intertextuality, Adaptation, or Fanfiction? April Linder and the Brontë Sisters', Nicole L. Wilson tackles the question whether April Lindner's YA novels *Jane* (2010) and *Catherine* (2013), modernised versions of *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847), should be classified as intertexts, adaptations or fan fiction. While Wilson's

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application of these categories appears a bit mechanical, it leads her to a convincing conclusion: she shows that as Lindner (an English professor who is obviously familiar with scholarship on the Brontës) manages "to write neo-Victorian novels that celebrate the Brontë sisters and increase their fandom without engaging in Victorian conventions" (p. 175) by mixing strategies and conventions associated with all three genres. Wilson thus suggests how neo-Victorian fiction can still 'work' for a young audience that is neither familiar with its pretexts nor the Victorian era as such.

Anah-Jayne Markland focuses on Jane Eyre as "a reassuring and empowering figure in children's and YA literature" (p. 179) in her chapter 'Growing Up Empowered by Jane: An Examination of *Jane Eyre* in Twenty-First-Century Children's and Young Adult Literature'. After a brief recapitulation of the most distinctive traits of Charlotte Brontë's Jane, Markland considers her presence in two board books: *A Counting Primer* (2013) and *Cozy Classics' Jane Eyre* (2013), before turning to the graphic novel *Jane, the Fox and Me* (2013) and Marta Acosta's Gothic novel *Dark Companion* (2012). Markland argues that for very young readers Jane "helps develop […] empathy and emotional sensibility and assists in cultivating a larger sense of the world by considering the lived experience of others", while "the tween-age reader navigates bullies and injustice with the aid of Jane" and "the adolescent is aided by Jane's story in navigating emerging sexuality, as well as developing a larger sense of sexual politics" (p. 192), which makes this chapter strikingly optimistic.

Sara K. Day develops a more sceptical perspective in her chapter 'Canon for the Cradle: Materiality and Commodity in Board Book Retellings of Victorian Novels'. Her insightful analysis begins with a keen assessment of the genre of the neo-Victorian board book in relation to the notion of a literary canon, the role of babies as consumers and competitive parenting. Day suggests that books like *Jane Eyre: A Counting Primer* (2012) and the Cozy Classics editions of *Oliver Twist* (2013) and *Great Expectations* (2016) appeal predominately to "economically secure or privileged children whose parents are concerned with their educational opportunities before they ever enter a classroom" (p. 199). She concludes that, as these books emphasise materiality and fashion, their Victorian pretexts "seem to act as little more than fancy backdrops against which to set very standard baby book lessons" (p. 205). Accordingly, "[t]he Victorian source material at work in BabyLit and Cozy Classics", she argues, "serves

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no clear literary or meaning-making purpose for the ostensible audience of child readers" (p. 206). Day's contribution thus highlights how neo-Victorian children's literature also serves as a mode of social distinction and commodification.

The volume's final chapter, Jessica Durgan's 'Uptops and Sooties: Neo-Victorian Representations of Race and Class in Gail Carriger's *Finishing School* Books', takes us back to YA steampunk. Like Ho, Durgan proceeds on the premise that while YA novels tend to advocate gender equality, they often privilege whiteness and fail to engage critically with questions of race and ethnicity. She presents Gail Carringer's *Finishing School* series (2013-2015) as a rare example that addresses and reverses this shortcoming by "consciously rewriting gendered, class-based, and racial hierarchies of the Victorian period for a contemporary young adult audience" (p. 214). According to Durgan, Carringer represents Britain as the multicultural society that it already was in the nineteenth century by acknowledging the presence of a Black British population in London. Carringer, we find out, simultaneously revises the strict and inhumane social and racial hierarchies the Empire imposed on its people by allowing for the possibility of a stable and affectionate relationship between Sophronia, a white young woman of the gentry, and Soap, a Black labourer. Sophronia and Soap decide to live together without ever getting married. Rather than presenting this union as a fairy-tale-like happy ending, Carringer uses it to problematise the discrimination and difficulties Sophronia and Soap experience as a mix-race couple.

In her afterword, YA novelist Eden Unger Bowditch returns to the question why we are constantly drawn back to the Victorian era in our digital age. She suggests that:

> [w]e do not know what the future will bring, but we know that we can, once again, look at the elegance of the Victorian era and scavenge, rummage, plunder, scour, and forage for that which will bring a level of beauty and magic to the era we impose our stark present aesthetic upon, but has yet to arrive. Or, perhaps, that future will have reintroduced the gears and steam, the piston, the visible ghost, to the machine. (p. 240)

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Dwelling on the unique potential neo-Victorianism bears for her as a writer and the pleasure and insights it gives her readers, Bowditch brings this collection to an atmospheric close.

This volume's contributions offer a nuanced panorama that acknowledges ambivalences and contradictions: while the authors make visible the playful, didactic, deconstructivist and emancipatory moments of neo-Victorian phenomena in literature for young readers, they equally shed light on its reductive, consumerist and nostalgic dimensions. I only have two very minor points of criticism: a few cross references between individual contributions, particularly those that are obviously linked by their broader themes or the same or similar texts (e.g. Ho's and Durgan's; Markland's and Day's), would have been desirable. Additionally, the volume would have benefitted from at least one more overarching diachronic chapter rather than only including synchronic case studies. In all other respects, however, the collection takes a balanced approach, reflected in its wide theoretical spectrum that brings together perspectives from the fields of postcolonial studies, gender studies, cultural materialism, animal studies, adaptation studies and many more.

In this way, Sawyer Fritz and Day's volume captures the mutifacetedness of neo-Victorian children's and YA literature in the twenty-first century. While we encounter many new insights that may be specific to the subgenre of neo-Victorian fiction for young people, the volume equally draws on established paradigms and findings of neo-Victorian Studies, which makes it possible to recognise continuities, intersections, and parallels between relevant works for recipients of all ages. Readers can use the volume as a great resource to familiarise themselves with important primary texts in the field, as well as gaining a solid overview of the different purposes that the engagement with the Victorian period fulfils in children's and YA fiction. For children's literature scholars, the volume makes a strong case for the relevance of neo-Victorian contents and approaches in their field, and critics who have thus far specialised on neo-Victorian fiction for adults will be introduced to a range of relevant new readings. As such a pioneering work, it will be impossible to miss Sawyer Fritz and Day's volume in the future. As the first collection of its kind, *The Victorian Era in Twenty-First Century Children's and Adolescent Literature and Culture* will likely become a crucial and standard reference for scholarship on neo-Victorian literature for young readers in the years to come.

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