BOOK REVIEWS: LITERARY AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

***Neo-Victorian Biofiction: Reimagining Nineteenth-Century Historical Subjects*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben**
(Brill Rodopi, 2020)

Biofiction is, as Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben note in their edited collection *Neo-Victorian Biofiction*, always implicated in an uneasy exchange between authorial liberty and authenticity. In an era shaped by 'contemporary confessional culture, with its simultaneous promise and violation of intimacy' (p. 18), Kohlke and Gutleben suggest that historical biofiction appeals to a distinctly twenty-first century desire for proximity with famous figures, and one that has been fulfilled across literary genres. Meanwhile, biofiction that is specifically *neo-Victorian*, with all the implications around reflexivity and metafictionality that the term entails, perhaps more than any other form of biographical writing exposes the problems of authenticity in these retellings, as well as their ethical implications. As historical biofiction offers opportunities for 'mediating, remediating, and shaping' contemporary understandings of real-life figures (p. 5), the genre raises important questions around authorial responsibility, and the risks of revisionist or reductionist narratives.

Kohlke and Gutleben's edited collection foregrounds these potential problems in the genre, highlighting the particular ways in which the nineteenth century has been mined for modern retellings. Kohlke and Gutleben's Introduction offers a definitive examination of biofiction within the neo-Victorian critical context, laying out the existing arguments within this critical field. The essays that follow each offer a new strand to this conversation and throughout, analysis is specialised and definitive without becoming obscure. Split into three complimentary sections, the collection traces the neo-Victorian biofictional impulse through a number of theoretical approaches. The first of these sections, 'Truths and Post-Truths', introduces the fundamental question of 'authenticity' with which neo-Victorianism, and particularly biofiction, struggles. The second, 'Forms of Otherness and (Re)Othering', engages particularly with ethical issues around representation and the voyeuristic tendencies of the genre. The final section, 'Afterlives of Fame and Infamy', is concerned with the legacies involved in the creation of biofiction, which aspects of the biofictional subject are retained by future writers and readers, and for what purpose. The collection is comprehensive, looking at

a range of neo-Victorian texts across various media, and each chapter offers a different, insightful analysis of examples of the biofiction genre.

Despite this diversity of perspectives, the collection has been well structured to reveal thematic crossovers between essays. Several chapters in the collection look to the recurring theme of authorship, for example, discussing the representation of Victorian authors and the process of writing in biofiction. Charlotte Boyce's chapter, '"Who in the World am I?": Truth, Identity, and Desire in Biofictional Representations of Lewis Caroll and Alice Liddell', opens the collection, and explores several recent depictions of Lewis Caroll and his relationship with muse, Alice Liddell. Arguing that 'the author-figure is consequently deified through his textual output' (p. 66), Boyce neatly encapsulates the problem of the recurring author figure in neo-Victorian biofiction, exploring whether such depictions are informed more readily by biographical material or by the fictions that these figures have produced. Authorial construction is therefore another key consideration of the chapter, which draws parallels between the diegetic process of authorship and the extra-diegetic process of biography. Emphasising the role of biography as a form that not only documents but actively *shapes* the legacies of its subject, Boyce highlights the ways in which neo-Victorian biofiction self-consciously engages with the subjectivity of historical record.

Jeanne Ellis's chapter, 'The Vivisectionist's Tale: Auto/Biographical Voice and the Queer Fictions of Empire in Ann Harries's *Manly Pursuits*', also looks to the authorial implications of neo-Victorian biofiction. Framing the auto/biographer as vivisectionist, who might choose and remove aspects from their source material, Ellis discusses the relationship between contemporary writers and their Victorian predecessors as a process of rediscovering, reinterrogating, and repurposing. Matthew Croft's essay on George MacDonald Fraser's Flashman papers emphasises the role of the reader in disentangling these kinds of cross-temporal narratives, affirming the link in the genre between authorship and readership in deconstructing the legacies of biofictional subjects.

Spectrality forms another key concern of this collection, with Kohlke and Gutleben reminding readers that the subjects of neo-Victorian biofiction are 'long since dead but conveniently resuscitated' (p. 2). Such language feeds into the idea of writers of biofiction as resurrectionists, not only dissecting and reconstructing the legacies of historical figures as Ellis details, but also invoking them as ghostly presences. Kohlke and Gutleben refer to biofiction's tendency to emphasise the 'spectral presence of past lives' (p. 8), arguing later in their Introduction that, '[c]hannelling the voices of the dead, biofiction itself becomes a kind of creative mediumistic performance' (p. 19). This formal interest in spectrality is also often, as

they note, reflected in a thematic consideration of mediumship, for example in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996). Considering the subjects of biofictions as themselves ghostly presences is a trope picked up by Boyce, who quotes (p. 75) Lucie Armitt's reading of the *Alice* books, and her hope that 'these ghosts will speak to me, and through their own mouths. In other words I treat it as history/biography, while knowing it's *only* a novel, pure make-believe.'[1] This idea of biofiction granting the dead a 'voice' also feeds into issues of representation in the genre, its potential for unearthing previously supressed perspectives. In her chapter 'Biofiction Goes Global: Richard Flanagan's *Wanting*, Dickens, and the Lost Child', Catherine Lanone refers to the 'ghostly figure of silenced Tasmanians' (p. 245), suggesting that this spectrality might offer opportunities for the representation of historically marginalised figures, whose haunting presence is a reminder of other characters' complicity in imperial violence.

Complicity is often turned on the reader in biofiction, as subjects are self-consciously displayed for the consumption of a modern readership. In her essay, 'Us and Them? Joseph Merrick in Neo-Victorian Children's Fiction', Helen Davies begins to delve deeper into the collection's earlier considerations around the ethics of fictionalisation. Her critique of narratives that, rather than reimagining 'agency for the disempowered', actually offer 'revisionary portrayals' of subjects with unusual and/or disabled bodies (p. 168), focuses on Joseph Merrick and the ableist language often employed in biofictional depictions. By focusing on children's fiction in particular, Davies exposes the pervasiveness of this language, the ways even seemingly benign representations of historical figures can become spectacle.

Children's literature is one of several under-investigated areas of biofiction that the collection aims to highlight, and a number of chapters look at biofiction across textual and non-textual forms. Marc Napolitano, for example, frames a discussion of biofiction within a non-prosaic medium, looking at how musical performances reinscribe the mythology surrounding the Lizzie Borden murders. In many of these performances, Napolitano points out, 'the idea of Lizzie as a silent sufferer, who finds her "voice" through singing and, eventually, through violent self-assertion, is central' (p. 370). However, as Davies argues in relation to stories about Joseph Merrick, Napolitano stresses here that the reader/watcher of these performances becomes uneasily implicated in an act of narrative manipulation. Lucy Smith's 'Julia Margaret Cameron and Archival Imagination: Materiality and Subjectivity in Biofictions of a Victorian Photographer' looks to the creation of biofictional prose from historical photography,

[1] Lucie Armitt, '"Stranger and Stranger": Alice and Dodgson in *Katie Roiphe's Still She Haunts Me*', *Women: A Cultural Review* 15.2 (2004), 167-79 (p. 169, emphasis in original).

highlighting the difficulties of reimagining the single moment of a photograph. Sylvia Mieszkowski, meanwhile, applies an analytical method from film production and photography to prosaic biofiction, installing texts in an arrangement of 'cross-lighting' (p. 267). Focusing on biofictions of Richard Francis Burton, Mieszkowski suggests that Burton's own writings can provide the 'key light' for the scene that is his life, with later biofictions operating as 'fill lights' which 'alleviate shadows cast by the main light' (p. 272). Reading these chapters together, it becomes clear that biofiction often interrogates its key themes both thematically and formally, looking to nineteenth-century culture and technology as framing devices for its narratives. As Mieszkowski highlights, understanding neo-Victorian biofiction within its dual temporal contexts illuminates new perspectives on the genre's continuing relevance, as well as its historical authenticity.

In addition to thematic continuities between these chapters, there are also theoretical strands that tie the essays together across the collection. Several essays, for example, approach these ethical questions from within a firmly philosophical framework. Roberta Gefer Wondrich's 'Biofictional Author Figures and Post-Authentic Truths' introduces an analysis of biofiction as being 'appraised in the light of the relationship between literature and the philosophical notions of value and truth' (p. 104), going on to define and examine the concept of the 'post-authentic' in these works. Laura Savu Walker similarly positions her essay, 'The Silence and the Roar: Resonant Encounters with George Eliot', as drawing on a phenomenological reading. Again examining the biofictional representation of authors, Walker considers biofiction to be 'violating the ontological boundaries between the real and the fictional' (p. 150), addressing the fundamental liminality of the genre of biofiction.

This collection thus offers a rich and varied approach to neo-Victorian biofiction, drawing together a number of recurring concerns of the genre. These chapters highlight the breadth of neo-Victorian biofiction, considering texts across the generic spectrum. The collection is also structured so as to reveal points of connection between various forms of media and theoretical approaches, particularly through the section headings, which neatly encapsulate three key concerns of the genre. This text will be a welcome intervention in neo-Victorian Studies, and of significant interest to scholars researching biofiction more broadly.

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