

**Family Tradition and Revision:
Review of Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (eds.),
*Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics***

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**Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (eds.),
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The editors of *Neo-Victorian Families*, Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, have undertaken an extensive and worthy endeavour in editing a neo-Victorian book series for Rodopi. A burgeoning field within both Victorian and contemporary literary and cultural criticism, Neo-Victorian Studies examines intriguing re-appropriations of Victorian culture that began as soon as Victoria died and have continued to proliferate vigorously. Because the Victorian age brought great changes for children through the enactment of laws limiting child labour, raising the age of consent, and providing for compulsory education, negotiating this cultural shift regarding children preoccupied many Victorian writers. Neo-Victorian literature, films, and theatre have taken up the nineteenth-century 'cult of the child' to re-examine it, critique it, and to use it as a lens to consider current attitudes and policies toward children and families, as the essays in this volume show. We need sustained and serious analysis of what such reworking of the Victorian experience suggests, both about the nineteenth century itself and about the century-plus since, which have had such constitutive impact on our current understanding of kinship, guardianship, identity, and even on our definitions of what is a 'child' and what is a 'family'.

This particular volume, *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics*, focuses on the depiction of the family in the neo-Victorian

landscape. An introduction plus fourteen essays provide a useful but somewhat uneven collection, drifting at times too far toward plot description, on the one hand, or toward simplistic theoretical reductions on the other. The essays display a common interest in the centrality of the Victorian family, both for the Victorians themselves and for our reconstruction of them; the book as a whole is engaged in demonstrating that the nineteenth-century family “was a site of radical instability, ideological conflict and inconsistency” (p. 4). The essayists and the editors work hard not to essentialise the family or the child, instead examining how both the Victorians and the neo-Victorians construct and represent families. Although Kohlke and Gutleben acknowledge that neo-Victorian literary and cultural works sometimes romanticise the past, they argue that just as often “the neo-Victorian de-mythologises the patriarchal and nuclear family ideal” (p. 10). It is clear that the editors are interested in the ways in which neo-Victorian fiction can provide a “revisionist and iconoclastic programme” that will undermine an individualistic ideology that privileges the heteronormative (p. 39). They also promote a kind of collaborative scholarship in keeping with their ideological position, evidenced by the essays’ speaking to and fruitfully citing one another. (Clearly the authors had an opportunity to share work at some stage in the collection’s development.) The volume includes essays that will be important for scholars of the canonical neo-Victorian novels that appear repeatedly in these pages, such as Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) and Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Fingersmith* (2002), as well as works by A. S. Byatt, Philip Pullman, Peter Ackroyd, Angela Carter, and Joseph O’Connor. The book also offers examinations of popular culture’s vision of the Victorian through essays on film (multiple versions of *A Christmas Carol*) and television (HBO’s *The Wire*, MTV’s *Wuthering Heights*, and BBC’s *The Forsyte Saga*). Drama also features in an essay on Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* (1979).

The book’s first section, ‘Endangered Childhoods and Lost Futures: Filthiness and Philanthropy’, dovetails precisely with the topic of this special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* on the child. The lead essay is ‘From London’s East End to West Baltimore: How the Victorian Slum Narrative Shapes *The Wire*’ by Matthew Kaiser. Joining a chorus of critics who read HBO’s critically lauded drama *The Wire* (2002-2008) as a neo-Victorian text, Kaiser persuasively and engagingly identifies the show as deriving

from ethnographic Victorian “slum narratives” like those of George Gissing or Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1836-1837). He differentiates these from “the slumming narrative” like *Hard Times* (1854) by Dickens or Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848), which he provocatively describes as “touristic, sensationalised or naïvely hyperbolic accounts of the lives of the poor” (p. 50). The Victorian slum narrative “presents itself as a moral epistemological corrective to the egoism, optimism, and paternalism of the slumming narrative” (p. 54). The fact that Dickens shows up in both categories is telling: although *The Wire* usually invokes Dickens to imply a “narrative and political impotence” (p. 47) and seems to reject Dickens as sentimental, Kaiser argues that rather than being “anti-Dickensian”, *The Wire* is “post-Dickensian” and impossible to imagine without its predecessor in *Oliver Twist* (pp. 66-67). Also concerned with the ways in which Victorian depictions of children in slums affect thinking now, the second essay, ‘Failing Families: Echoes of Nineteenth-Century Child Rescue Discourse in Contemporary Debates around Child Protection’ by Shurlee Swain, shifts the scene away from literary study to analyse the language used in discussions of contemporary social services for children. Swain identifies a kind of “orphanage nostalgia” in response to recent failures of child-protection services. Current discourse creates an idealisation of an old system where there is an illusion that “institutions provided love and security” (p. 72); Swain argues – and who could disagree? – against the reinstatement of such a system.

Returning to literary critique, the final pair of essays in this section treats Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) alongside a selection of other neo-Victorian texts. ‘The Figure of the Child in Neo-Victorian Queer Families’ by Louisa Yates focuses on the depiction of the family of choice, so that the child – rather than the patriarch – becomes the centre or organising principle in these neo-Victorian family narratives. She compares the Faber novel with Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* in relation to its exploration of current “cultural concerns about civil partnerships, adoption rights, and child protection issues” (p. 94); each novel presents a queer family unit. Yates concludes that Faber and Waters “take advantage of the strict social conventions” that readers assume “dictated relationships in the nineteenth century” (she does not say precisely who these readers are or how she knows what they assume) in order to replace them with conventions that fit “far better into the model of (post)modern families, who

seek societal acceptance for their alternative kinship models” (p. 115). Despite some slipperiness, it is a smart essay applying Holly Furneaux’s notion of ‘deprivileging’ a heteronormative notion of parenting. Also considering *The Crimson Petal and the White* amongst others, ‘Neo-Victorian Childhoods: Re-imagining the Worst of Times’ by the volume editor Kohlke, argues that in Faber’s novel “the child functions mainly as a traumatic mirror for the adult female protagonist” Sugar (p. 132). Kohlke notes that in neo-Victorian literature, “representations of childhood predominantly figure society’s ethical failures” in caring for and protecting “its most vulnerable members” (p. 135). While Victorian writers emphasise society’s guilt for the peril children find themselves in and relish the “redeeming role” that “an investment in childhood” provides in “compensation for loss of faith in traditional religion” (p. 143), neo-Victorian writers use children to “evoke a qualitatively different kind of affective reader response”, one linked instead “to powerless outrage and fascinated horror” (p. 144). Excavating how Victorian constructions of children offer a useful vocabulary of images and situations for current writers, the four essays in this section establish tools for a neo-Victorian critique of contemporary culture.

The remaining essays in the collection connect less overtly to the topic of this special issue on the neo-Victorian child, but several constitute important contributions to Neo-Victorian Studies. The volume’s middle section clusters five essays on gender, primarily in neo-Victorian theatrical, film, and television performances of various kinds of family life. Maria Seguro’s essay, ‘Deconstructing the Victorian Family? Trying to Reach *Cloud Nine*’, examines the sexual politics of the 1979 award-winning play *Cloud Nine*; it is strongest when considering the parodic critique in the second act of recontextualised Victorian elements from the first act. ‘The Cratchits on Film’ by Regina Hansen analyses multiple large and small screen adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* to trace shifting gender norms over time. For example, while a 1984 *Carol* provides a “traditionally masculine Bob” (p. 188), a 1999 version accentuates Mrs. Cratchit’s toughness and acerbity in contrast to a more fragile Mr. Cratchit, who is depicted as a sensitive and loving father (see p. 192), suggesting a fairly straightforward (and largely unproblematised) progressive trajectory. Sarah Edwards’s ‘The Rise and Fall of the Forsytes, from Neo-Victorian to Neo-Edwardian Marriage’ is a smart and sophisticated consideration of John Galsworthy as

a neo-Victorian Edwardian, pointing out that the *The Forsyte Saga* (1906-1921) is emblematic of the “Edwardian divorce novel that made the destruction of Victorian marriage the subject of modern fiction” (p. 202). In contrast to Hansen’s approach, Edwards troubles “a simple linear model of progress from benighted Victorian to enlightened Edwardian values (p. 206). She concludes the chapter with a discussion of adaptations, contrasting the 1967 BBC “heritage film” with more recent productions that “re-focus on the early twentieth century, on the ‘birth of now’ with which the Edwardians are increasingly associated” (p. 219). Hila Shachar’s ‘The Lost Mother and the Enclosed Lady: Gender and Domesticity in MTV’s Adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*’ observes that while the novel critiques Victorian gender ideologies, the 2003 adaptation reinstates them (p. 223). The essay also suggests that neo-Victorian representations tend toward the conservative; such generalisations are less interesting and less sustainable than Shachar’s many finely observed individual points. Moving back to the collection’s main focus on prose, ‘Monarchs and Patriarchs: Angela Carter’s Recreation of the Victorian Family in *The Magic Toyshop*’ by Sarah Gamble is an exciting and original consideration of Carter – typically considered as an example of feminist magical realism and read either psychoanalytically or in conjunction with postmodernist texts – through a neo-Victorian lens. In the novel, “from the outset the Victorian period is identified not with prosperity, enterprise, and stability, but with ruin, decomposition, and an uncanny Gothic persistence in its representation of a past that should be over and done with” (p. 255). As a neo-Victorian narrative, Carter’s novel is “situated in a state of self-loathing, seeking to eradicate its own rootedness in a cultural context defined by the nineteenth-century” (p. 256).

In line with the emphasis of much neo-Victorian criticism on trauma as a mode of memory, the final section comprises five essays exploring neo-Victorian family traumas and their connection to large political or historical issues. The first is a somewhat descriptive piece, ‘Family Traumas and Serial Killing in Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*’ by Susana Onega. It argues that Ackroyd’s novel, while not feminist, is nonetheless radical because it “sets traditional Christian notions of ‘family’ into question” (p. 269) by bringing forward “the mechanisms of sublimation and displacement employed in mid-Victorian sensation novels and penny dreadfuls to represent the objectifying, often abusive dysfunctionality of

nuclear family relations” (p. 294). In ‘Family Trauma and Reconfigured Families: Philip Pullman’s Neo-Victorian Detective Series’, Anca Vlasopolos offers a deft close reading of *The Ruby in the Smoke*, which highlights “the imbrications of the opium trade, colonialism, and the traffic of women and children” (p. 309) while privileging the “family of choice” over the biological family (p. 308). She demonstrates that Pullman dismantles what we think of as Victorian “formulations of family and childhood in order to get at the heart of power relations” that “shaped private formations and the global economies” (pp. 297-298). Also rethinking history, Melissa Fegan, in ““That heartbroken island of incestuous hatreds”: Famine and Family in Joseph O’Connor’s *Star of the Sea*’, argues that O’Connor’s historical novel challenges “the enduring nationalist version” of the Potato Famine, “in which the English government was responsible for the deaths of up to two million people” in Ireland (p. 326). ‘(In)Visible Disability in Neo-Victorian Families’ by Rosario Arias extrapolates depictions of “physical disability in the family” in neo-Victorian literature to a “symptom of the disabled nation” (p. 346) in her analysis of John Harwood’s *The Ghost Writer* (2004) and Belinda Stirling’s *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007). Both draw on representations of disability to “critique and subvert nostalgic re-appropriations of Victorian England” (p. 361). Although a bit more uneven in execution than the first four essays of this volume, this section illuminates the role of the neo-Victorian family in the troubling of national trauma in new ways.

The final essay both of this section and of the collection is Georges Letissier’s ‘More Than Kith and Less than Kin: Queering the Family in Sarah Waters’s Neo-Victorian Fictions’. It acts as a bookend to the volume, returning to *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith*. Along with *Affinity* (1999), these novels by Waters create “situations in which characters improvise kinship relationships to make up for their inability to conform to the traditional model offered by socially stable heterosexual couples” (pp. 378-379). Letissier concludes that Waters’s novels intervene in current dialogues about non-traditional families by taking what was often marginalised in the Victorian era “out of the domestic closet of nineteenth-century fiction and poetry to show how pertinent it is to contemporary debates or current ethical choices” (p. 391). This succinctly summarises the claims of several critics in this volume about the neo-Victorian family more generally.

Although *Neo-Victorian Families* is a fairly big book at over 400 pages, it would have benefitted from broader generic representation. Devoted primarily to fiction and television, this collection's focus seems surprisingly old-fashioned for anything dubbed 'neo', concentrating heavily on what might be considered the established neo-Victorian canon of serious novelists. Even when venturing away from prose, the collection stays on very safe ground: its one essay on theatre analyses an Obie-winner; the essays on film and television stick to mainstream sources such as Hollywood, HBO, BBC, or MTV. Neo-Victorian graphic novels, fanzines, video games, musical theatre, poetry, and even steampunk are almost untouched; yet they represent rich fields that are the focus of considerable current research. In part, this critical phenomenon may be part of a larger bias in Victorian studies toward the novel, but it is nonetheless surprising in the area of neo-Victorian studies given the vibrant coverage by *Neo-Victorian Studies* of, for example, *Sweeney Todd* (2:1) and *Steampunk* (3:1). Casting a wider net would have provided a more representative sampling of how neo-Victorian works depict and redefine families and what cultural work such representations perform.

Nevertheless, Kohlke and Gutleben's new volume contains several excellent essays that scholars concentrating on the neo-Victorian child in particular will need to consult. The collection makes a timely intervention in showing the relevance of neo-Victorian studies to current debates about the family, particularly as centred on gay rights. In this respect, *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics* unsettles traditional notions of the family (and what constitutes a family) both for the Victorians and for us.