

The 'My Story' Series: A Neo-Victorian Education in Feminism

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Abstract: Neo-Victorian novels for young adult readers – especially the first-person narratives of Scholastic's 'My Story' series, which is marketed to girls – are providing a feminist education and employing fiction to encourage political awareness in the present, even as they connect contemporary audiences with activists of the past. The antecedents for this genre of didactic feminist fiction, which uses the nineteenth century and draws on actual historical figures for its anti-patriarchal lessons, are to be found in works such as Virginia Woolf's *Flush* (1933), indicating that the origin of what we call neo-Victorian literature may have been earlier than most scholars have suggested.

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Writing for her own relief – and also doing so unknowingly for the benefit of the reading audience – the fictional adolescent protagonist of *1900: A Brand New Century: A London Girl's Diary, 1899-1900* (2010) erupts with anger, in her journal entry for 5 November 1900, over the rampant injustice that surrounds her. Even as the annual Guy Fawkes celebrations in London make her ponder the failed Gunpowder Plot, so they crystallise (albeit in somewhat comically hyperbolic form) her desire for radical action:

I feel that Father and everything he stands for should be blown up. Britain, the Empire, the lack of rights for women, keeping me away from what I care for and love, driving Gran out of our home. No, I don't want to blow up my father. I love my father. It is what he believes in that I want to destroy. Surely I am not alone? Whether I be born into an

aristocratic family or I come from a very poor one, surely other young girls of my age experience the frustrations I am experiencing? (Drinkwater 2010: 146–47)

The thoughts she commits to paper are ones that she dare not share with friends or family, except perhaps with her grandmother, a socialist and women's suffrage supporter whose political agitation has made her an unwelcome presence in the house. Indeed, her grandmother has been told to move out by the protagonist's father, the wealthy owner of an import-and-export business that profits from imperialism, while its workers are underpaid and anyone who tries to join a union faces dismissal. The same fictional diary, however, that serves as an outlet for expressing the heroine's feminist "frustrations" also functions as a consciousness-raising tool, as it openly appeals to the nascent political sympathies of its young female audience and binds together in solidarity a fictional character from the past with readers in the present. In posing her rhetorical question about what "girls [...] experience", the first-person narrator may not be addressing those twenty-first-century readers directly; nonetheless, no one could fail to recognise the implicit plea for others to join her and be moved to second her *cri de coeur*. What seems an artless strategy on the part of the narrator is, in fact, a self-conscious and effective one, when used by the author of this neo-Victorian novel in diary form, which aims to instruct and to recruit audiences across the divide of time. Fashioning the voice of a turn-of-the-century girl whose social observations resonate with their own, the text stokes its readers' outrage over "the lack of rights for women" and other forms of human rights abuses, whether then or now.

In *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, John Stephens observes that the "most pervasive strategy for effecting the illusion of realism in modern children's literature is first-person narration, where narrator and principal focalizer are the same" (Stephens 1992: 251). This lesson has been taken to heart and applied to works for both pre-adolescent and adolescent readers by Scholastic Children's Books, UK, which for more than ten years has marketed a series of paperback historical novels presented in diary form and titled 'My Story'. As the promotional copy printed on the back cover of Carol Drinkwater's *1900: A Brand New Century* announces in issuing its appealing invitation to the audience, readers will "[e]xperience history first-hand with My Story – a series of vividly imagined accounts of

life in the past” (Drinkwater 2010: back cover). Although these fictional first-person narratives recreate voices from a variety of chronological periods, many of the novels centre upon what is known as the long nineteenth century – that is, the period up to the First World War – and almost all of those that do are also written from the “vividly imagined” perspectives of young girls. These include Sue Reid’s *Mill Girl: The Diary of Eliza Helsted, Manchester, 1842-1843* (2002); Drinkwater’s *The Hunger: The Diary of Phyllis McCormack, Ireland, 1845-1847* (2001) and *Suffragette: The Diary of Dollie Baxter, London, 1909-1913* (2003); Frances Mary Hendry’s *Young Nanny: A Victorian Girl’s Diary, 1850* (2010); Pamela Oldfield’s *Victorian Workhouse, The Diary of Edith Lorrimer, England, 1871* (2004) and *Factory Girl: A Victorian Match Girl, London, 1888* (2011); and Ellen Emerson White’s *Titanic: An Edwardian Girl’s Diary, 1912* (2012). The combined effect is that of a neo-Victorian counter-history: the production of a newly feminised past, in which girls’ lives and experiences supposedly were central, instead of marginal, to major events and social movements. But for what purpose, besides the obvious one of selling texts to a niche market, has this alternative reality been produced?

Jean Webb notes that fiction for children and young adults tends toward realism in general and, however fantastic the elements it might contain, “as a genre [it] purports to convince the reader that this is a ‘real’ world, that this is life as it ‘really’ is” (Webb 2006: 73), as it addresses situations and problems familiar to its young audience. This idea has been reaffirmed by a variety of scholars in the field, from Katherine Bucher and M. Lee Manning, who speak of how novels for young readers aim “to reflect the world as we know it” (Bucher and Manning 2006: 86), to David L. Russell, who adds, “Even when the setting is exotic [...] the writer tries to create a place we would recognize” (Russell 2009: 236). Certainly, these observations hold true for the neo-Victorian works in the ‘My Story’ series. All of them incorporate careful research and, in a number of cases, conclude with a ‘Timeline’, listing in chronological order the actual Victorian or turn-of-the-century events and figures to which the fictional narrative has referred; some provide, as well, a final ‘Historical Note’ in the authoritative voice of the work’s twenty-first-century author, discussing matters of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century social, cultural, and political life. But all of these novels, too, make use of young female protagonists whose ways of speaking, thinking, and acting will resonate with their intended

audience of modern-day girl readers, although they might sometimes risk seeming anachronistic (if perhaps only in the eyes of better-informed adults).

The ‘My Story’ series is hardly unique in following this practice. Quite often, according to Catherine Butler and Hallie O’Donovan, “realist historical texts feature” characters “who exhibit [...] a modern set of attitudes hard to account for from their supposed upbringing and surroundings. Such characters may then act as a bridge between the reader’s world and that of the book” (Butler and O’Donovan 2012: 11). After all, as they explain in *Reading History in Children’s Books*, “historical novels, like time-slips [...] address the relationship between past and present” and self-consciously “make use of the parallels between the time depicted and that of the composition” in “an attempt to use the knowledge already present in writer and reader as a booster station, to intensify the immediacy of the past” (Butler and O’Donovan 2012: 12). Again, though this holds true for the neo-Victorian novels issued under the banner of ‘My Story’, the wish to “intensify the immediacy of the past” may not be the sole motivation behind the forging of such a connection, for these narratives also labour toward another end.

A representative moment from one of these texts offers a clue. Pamela Oldfield, author of two different titles in the series, presents her *Victorian Workhouse, The Diary of Edith Lorrimer, England, 1871* in the form of entries from the journal of an upper-middle-class girl. Here, Oldfield asks us to peek – virtually, if not literally – over the shoulder of a fictional protagonist living in her widowed mother’s house in Kent, who is committing to her diary both her dissatisfactions and her hopes:

As a modern young woman, I believe women deserve certain rights and should be given the vote. I have read the book by John Stuart Mill entitled *The Subjection of Women*, in which he declares women completely equal with men and demands that we are given the vote. Mama disagrees. She says men are wiser than women and more used to the ways of the world, but she was brought up to think that way and I cannot blame her. My generation is more enlightened [...]. Personally I think Queen Victoria should use her influence to see that women *do* have a say in their own futures and in the

running of the country. Sadly I suspect the Queen has so much power as monarch that she doesn't care about the rest of her sisters. (What a thing to say! I shall be locked up in the tower for treason!) (Oldfield 2004: 108, original emphasis)

Clearly, there are comic elements and effects throughout. The audience is encouraged to chuckle knowingly at the self-dramatising tendencies of the fifteen-year-old narrator, as well as at the irony of a girl mired in the Victorian age – which no young reader today would consider a progressive period – defining herself as “enlightened” and “modern”. But in this novel about the horrors of life inside a nineteenth-century workhouse as encountered by the altruistic mother-and-daughter ‘lady visitors’ the issues at hand could not be more serious, and the protagonist’s perspective suggests an alternative, if not a solution, to the rampant problems of gender-based and class-based injustice that are illustrated throughout the narrative.

The villains of the plot turn out to be men who swindle, control, subordinate, and even physically assault women of all classes, while girls and older women alike who challenge authority and refuse to be silenced do manage to effect some positive change in the end. If young readers have not entered this reading experience already sympathetic to feminism as an active force for good, then they are likely to leave it with a new frame of mind. Indeed, it is the didactic function that the novels of the ‘My Story’ series serve that distinguishes these neo-Victorian realist texts: their project to introduce audiences composed mainly of young girls to feminist ideologies, both in nineteenth and in twenty-first-century terms, and to represent the individual and collective political actions of women in a positive light. Over and over, they invite readers of all classes – whether they “be born into an aristocratic family or [...] come from a very poor one” – to undergo the awakening that follows from “experiencing” the “frustrations” of young female characters who lack supportive feminist networks and must forge these for themselves (Drinkwater 2010: 147).

How unusual, in this regard, are these novels commissioned by Scholastic since 2000, especially within the still-developing category of neo-Victorian fiction? The answer may depend upon how and where we draw the boundaries around that classification and how we identify its lineage. Ordinarily, as Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben state in their introductory essay for *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and*

Cultural Politics, the list of “[s]eminal neo-Victorian classics” begins with John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), although it is possible to admit “earlier exemplars, such as Marghanita Laski’s *The Victorian Chaise-Longue* (1953), all [of which] position family relations at the heart of their narratives” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2011: 6). If, however, we were to establish the point of origin for neo-Victorian fiction not in the 1960s or even the 1950s, but several decades earlier, with Virginia Woolf’s *Flush* (1933, we might also see something new about the centrality to this genre, from the very start, of both feminist perspectives and didactic impulses. Perhaps this reconfiguration of the tradition could also help us to understand why neo-Victorian novels have so readily found a home in the sphere of young adult fiction, which has always welcomed literature with a social purpose. Narratives such as those published under ‘My Story’ are now explicitly introducing children to nineteenth-century history from a feminist point of view and also implicitly advocating for the exercise *in the present* of principles such as equality and sisterhood across the divides of difference.

Virginia Woolf’s 1933 novel *Flush* has often been mischaracterised as a biography – possibly, because Woolf labelled it as one in the subtitle that appears on the title page (although her use of the same subtitle for her 1928 fantasy *Orlando* is usually understood to be a joke: a barb at the expense of biographers). Purporting to tell the story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) around the time of her marriage and flight to Italy in the 1840s – though from the perspective of the poet’s thoughtful, sensitive dog – *Flush* bears numerous hallmarks of what later would be known as neo-Victorianism. These include a revisionist approach to the nineteenth-century past; scepticism about conventional history-writing as a source of authoritative knowledge; a playful and parodic style; the mixing of imaginary characters with actual historical figures, along with both documented and invented scenes from the lives of the latter; and a concern with representing previously unrepresented experiences, particularly those of subjugated groups.

What is also plain throughout *Flush* is Virginia Woolf’s wish to use her narrative to endorse women’s defiance of patriarchal oppression – whether in the Victorian period or in the writer’s own Interwar era – and to valorise a transhistorical feminist ethic that gives primacy both to emotion

and to the preservation of individual lives. Woolf forgoes comic irony when depicting Elizabeth Barrett's determination to ransom Flush, her pet, from a gang of East London dog-nappers, while Barrett's father, brothers, and even her fiancé, Robert Browning, attempt to stop her from rescuing the imprisoned animal she loves, and who loves her. That Woolf is more often associated with literary impressionism than with didacticism, and that critics such as Pamela Caughie have called *Flush* a "postmodern" work – thus, one that emphasises instability, indeterminacy, and "complex and conflicted aesthetics" (Caughie 1991: 154) – should not blind us to the presence here of a political agenda. After all, Woolf was the author of the experimental *The Waves* (1931), but also of *A Room of One's Own* (1929), a rousing polemic based on lectures meant to inspire women undergraduates at both the Newnham and Girton Colleges, who were charged with preparing the way for the great female poet of the future. In *Flush*, Woolf ridicules all manner of Victorian tastes and preoccupations, from the over-decoration of rooms to the obsession with séances. Yet she never makes fun of Elizabeth Barrett for championing love and loyalty – even when the object of devotion is a dog – or for opposing tyranny, especially when it occurs in the sphere of middle-class domestic life.

Of course, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, two of the leading theorists in the academic field of Neo-Victorian Studies, are quite correct in saying that, when it comes to contemporary neo-Victorian fiction, "the ethical question, like the aesthetic one, lurks at the margins, or in the footnotes, of our appropriations" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 27). Nonetheless, there have been instances, as in the case of *Flush*, when feminist "ethical" matters have moved to the centre and to the foreground, and I believe that they continue to do so in more recent texts, whether for the young adult or the adult market. My interest here is in identifying a neo-Victorian counter-tradition, or at least a counter-strand – in acknowledging a pattern of both twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist writers who have been appropriating Victorian settings, situations, and characters for reasons bound up with their own moral imperatives, and who have done so in the service of political education and advocacy. These authors have specialised in representing past moments that illustrate and articulate current notions of social justice and in using fiction as a didactic medium to act upon the audience.

The concept of fiction-with-a-purpose was fashionable in the nineteenth century, though it is largely unfashionable today in the realm of what is usually called serious literary fiction. Feminist historical fiction about the Victorians, however, has served to bridge this divide in taste and aesthetics. At the same time, it has operated across the boundaries between so-called adult and young adult literature, making available to adolescent and pre-adolescent audiences, as well as to their adult counterparts, both the pleasure of metafictional playfulness of the sort often associated with neo-Victorianism and the empowering experience of an awakened political consciousness.

Examples of feminist didacticism from the realm of adult neo-Victorian fiction are many. A representative text, however, is Gaynor Arnold's 2008 *Girl in a Blue Dress*, which is subtitled *A Novel Inspired by the Life and Marriage of Charles Dickens*. The protagonist, Dorothea Gibson, is Arnold's version of the long-suffering and much-maligned Catherine Hogarth Dickens, whose story has also been taken up in such recent biographies as Lillian Nayder's *The Other Dickens: A Life of Catherine Hogarth* (2010), which attempts to rehabilitate its subject's reputation. In an 'Author's Note' that precedes the novel, Gaynor Arnold makes clear that *Girl in a Blue Dress* "is a work of fiction, and in creating my own story of Alfred and Dorothea Gibson, I have taken a novelist's liberties" (Arnold 2008: vii). Nonetheless, she concludes by asserting that "in Dorothea Gibson I have tried to give voice to the largely voiceless Catherine Dickens" (Arnold 2008: vii), thus blurring the boundaries between neo-Victorian fiction and a non-fictional polemic, while aligning herself with a larger feminist political project of recuperating women's lost or silenced voices.

Arnold writes a political coming-of-age story, in which the subject is a middle-aged widow who eventually achieves, albeit later in life, an understanding of the social dynamics that enabled her husband, a famous writer, to victimise and abandon her. The novel builds to an emotional climax as Dorothea Gibson turns on her husband's closest male friend and finally ceases to be voiceless, actively protesting the position of women who "have given up our whole lives to serve the needs of men" (Arnold 2008: 382). She demands to know, "[How] can it be proper for a woman to be married twenty years, then cast aside on a pittance? [...] Why do we have to go cap in hand for every bit of money that we need?"; at the same time, her

rhetorical questions also point toward a remedy: “If women made the laws, wouldn’t things be different?” (Arnold 2008: 382). Her plaint is meant to resonate with the modern reader in an age when wives are still discarded in favor of younger replacements, and when divorce often impoverishes women while men’s incomes rise. Here, the differences between two historical moments do not collapse or cease to matter; yet both periods come into alignment, paralleling and even mirroring each other, as the protagonist’s recognition of the effects of a gendered asymmetry in social power incites contemporary readers to examine their own situations as well.

A number of the titles in the ongoing ‘My Story’ series work toward the same end of providing audiences with an education in feminist principles and activist goals. This is especially true when they are set in and look critically at the Victorian period, with the feminist impetus clearest in novels such as Carol Drinkwater’s *1900: A Brand New Century: A London Girl’s Diary, 1899-1900*, which was first published in 2001 as *Twentieth-Century Girl: The Diary of Flora Bonnington, London, 1899-1900*, then re-released under its current title in 2010. As in Oldfield’s *Victorian Workhouse*, which emphasises didactic intertextuality when its protagonist learns from her own reading of *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Drinkwater’s novel self-consciously alludes to actual Victorian texts as sources of inspiration and political awareness. Fourteen-year-old Flora Bonnington enjoys a privileged life as the daughter of a prosperous, conservative, and patriarchal merchant. But through her maternal grandmother, a radical socialist and suffragist who sent Flora’s late mother to university, she also encounters the literary work of Mary Kingsley (1862-1900) and, in fact, Kingsley herself. Later, Flora will treasure her presentation copy of *Travels in West Africa* (1897), supposedly inscribed and posted by the author shortly before dying abroad.

Fact interpenetrates the world of fiction, as not only Flora, but the reader, receives instruction in what we now would call feminist intersectional theory – a foundational principle of so-called Third Wave Feminism, developed by late-twentieth-century academics, that posits the inextricability of gender, race, and class. For some commentators, such as Leslie McCall, the recognition that “multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” interlock with and impact upon one another is the “most important [...] contribution that women’s studies [...] has made”, for it counters the notion that gender alone is a sufficient

category of political oppression to address (McCall 2005: 1771). In fact, Flora's grandmother makes that very point, being careful to tell the protagonist (and, by extension, the young audience as well) that "inequality does not rest only with women"; rather, "It applies to poverty and the poor, as well as to many of the colonial peoples who are ruled by our empire" (Drinkwater 2010: 38-39). As the first-person narrative voice in Drinkwater's novel informs us, using the principles that Kingsley's work expounds,

Gran explained to me that it is true that Mary Kingsley has been battling with the Colonial Office because she does not approve of the way they want to run West Africa. Then she quoted something that Mary had written a few years ago, after one of her trips to Africa. "I feel certain," she had said, "that a black man is no more an undeveloped white man than a woman is an undeveloped man."

"You see how important our battle for the vote is, Flora. A world ruled exclusively by white men who believe themselves superior beings is a dangerous one. It is a world built on prejudice and lack of respect." (Drinkwater 2010: 86)

The repeated lesson that "[a]ny form of domination, whether it be male over female or rich over poor is [...] against the basic rights of human beings" (Drinkwater 2010: 72) is rendered more urgent when Flora meets Christabel Pankhurst (1880-1958), the suffrage leader who will later help to found the Women's Social and Political Union, and is drawn into her circle. Pankhurst passes on to Flora her rallying cry of "Deeds not words" (Drinkwater 2010: 106), but what we also see through this neo-Victorian mashup of actual and fictional figures is a demonstration of the political efficacy of words – specifically, of initiation into feminist thinking, both past and present, through the reading of texts such as this novel.

Other works in the 'My Story' series affirm this message – for instance, Oldfield's *Victorian Workhouse*, which presents a fascinating exercise in intertextuality with another example of neo-Victorian fiction. In some ways, it is a rewriting, though far more hopeful in tone and outcome, of Sarah Waters's 1999 novel for adult readers, *Affinity*. Like *Affinity*, it

foregrounds a cross-class relationship – albeit an ambiguous adolescent girl crush, rather than an unambiguous lesbian attachment – within the punitive setting of a Victorian institution. Waters's protagonist, the well-born Margaret Prior, finds her equivalent in Edith Lorrimer, a young woman who is restive under the control of an oppressively genteel, traditionally minded mother with the biases of her class. Visiting a workhouse as part of her altruistic duty opens up for Edith – as prison-visiting does for Margaret – a new comprehension of the inequalities and injustices of the class system:

As we walked home, I asked Mama what rations they [the workhouse inmates] were given. It seems that the women have four ounces of cooked meat a day with a few potatoes, thin porridge and gruel. [...] It sounds revolting but Mama says they are grateful for it and funds do not allow for more [...]. Today I am looking forward to a midday meal of baked salmon and gratin potatoes. Tonight it will be cold meat and a slice of quince tart. I almost feel guilty. (Oldfield 2004: 18)

This dawning of guilt leads to a fuller understanding of her own position as the beneficiary of unearned privilege, when she is drawn into the plight of Rosie Chubb, a spirited, defiant, and attractive young inmate of the workhouse, whose character mirrors that of Waters's working-class trickster-figure, Selina Dawes. As their relationship advances, the image of Rosie even comes to Edith in her sleep, in almost witchlike form:

Last night I dreamed I was walking along that gloomy workhouse corridor, and it was very dark and full of echoes, and Rosie Chubb was calling to me for help from the other end. I tried to run towards her but my legs were so heavy, I knew I could never reach the end of the corridor. I saw [...] Rosie with a cat perched on her shoulder, but instead of being green, the cat's eyes were red and glowing. Suddenly Rosie began to glide towards me [...] and] as I called her name she reached out to touch me [...]. (Oldfield 2004: 14-15)

Adult readers (though not Oldfield's adolescent audiences) will recognise the similarities between this haunting of Edith by Rosie Chubb and Margaret Prior's growing obsession in *Affinity* with Selina, who claims the power to transcend physical limits and project her spirit beyond the prison walls, into Margaret's bedroom. Stronger still are the resemblances between the themes of surveillance and exposure that run throughout *Victorian Workhouse* and *Affinity*. As in Waters's fiction, the women prison inmates in Oldfield's novel suffer from being watched by wardens and by lady-visitors alike, while Edith deliberately arouses horror in the minds of her readers, as both she and they are confronted with the spectacle of women stripped of all privacy in the workhouse:

I was taken on a tour of the premises, and [...] went into the bathhouse, where poor Fanny Barker was taking a bath under the supercilious eye of Mrs Noye [...]. Mrs Barker was shivering as she knelt in a few inches of cold water while she tried to wash her hair. [...] The poor soul was obviously embarrassed and I left immediately. How dreadful to be naked and watched by curious strangers. So much for Mama and her hopes of dignity for the unfortunates incarcerated here, I thought sadly. (Oldfield 2004: 28-29)

Oldfield's novel plays subtly with allusions to Waters's neo-Victorian predecessor text, where a prison guard invites Margaret to view the bodies of the inmates as a form of entertainment, asking, "Will you go in with them ma'am, and watch them bathe?" (Waters 1999: 80).

Victorian Workhouse also displays obvious intertextual links with the nineteenth-century literature of social reform. The young upper-middle-class protagonist not only learns from reading of works by women, but then turns to authorship herself as a political tool:

This evening I was rereading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* about the slaves in America before the Civil War and thought about whether I should try to write a novel. The Brontë sisters started their writing at a very early age, so why shouldn't I? I wondered if Harriet Beecher Stowe had seen the slaves for herself and whether or not she had exaggerated their plight.

Probably not, I decided, comparing their existence to that of the unfortunates in the workhouse. Life can be almost unbearable for the poor and lowly, wherever they live. [...] Not for the first time I felt angry with Queen Victoria. [...] She should come back to London and live in the real world and see the plight of some of her subjects. (Oldfield 2004: 83-84)

The imaginary Edith Lorrimer's journal thus serves as an author's working notebook: "I spent some time rereading my diary and [...] wonder if I could turn it into a book" (Oldfield 2004: 192). Through accumulated layers of fact and fiction, this invented diary indeed becomes both a neo-Victorian novel for the young and a call to action, from one century to the next. Edith asks, "I wonder if Queen Victoria has any notions of [...] what a huge gulf there is between the few rich and millions of poor?" (Oldfield 2004: 157). Her angry rhetorical question invites the present-day reader to substitute, for Queen Victoria, the names of contemporary monarchs, politicians, and corporations.

For Kate Mitchell, neo-Victorian novels are "memory texts" that reflect and shape the memory of a community (Mitchell 2010: 32). In *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing*, Heilmann and Llewellyn, however, suggest that, "[a]lthough concerned with looking backwards, women's historical fiction is also, crucially, about moving forwards" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2007: 11). As we ask what "moving forwards" means, and what it requires, one way to interpret this movement is in political terms; in that case, it will require an engaged readership, willing to consider – to invoke the title of William Morris's 1887 lecture – 'How We Live and How We Might Live'.

Who or what will model this kind of thinking? In 'Look to the Fringes of Fiction', James Gunn bemoans the fact that writers of the modern "literary novel" have, in his view, largely abdicated their roles as social critics and voices of conscience: "Social and political issues can still be found in contemporary novels [...] But, with a few notable exceptions, the more attention the author gives to the issue, the less literary the novel will be considered" (Gunn 2012). Therefore, "the most effective" explorations of "social injustice" are to be found instead in "genre novels", for only marginalised forms such as science fiction now "do what Dickens [...] did";

science fiction, however, is not the sole “place to look for social or political” engagement of a sustained and concerted kind (Gunn 2012). In an age when literary fiction in general allegedly shrinks from performing a politically educative function, some writers are making neo-Victorian returns that enable them to instruct and challenge their readers, as Victorian authors once felt emboldened to do. They are also turning to genres such as children’s and young adult fiction, which have never ceased to view teaching and exhortation as legitimate literary aims. Traditionally, literature for young readers has been a genre where women writers have been particularly welcome – and, not coincidentally, one that has flown below the critical radar. Such invisibility can sometimes be an advantage, when it comes to fiction that wades into the thick of controversy. Scholastic’s ‘My Story’ series is quietly but openly inculcating feminist principles and perspectives, and it is using the form of first-person neo-Victorian narratives to do so. Sometimes, it seems, we need the voice of a “modern young woman” of 1871 to show us the way (Oldfield 2004: 108).

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