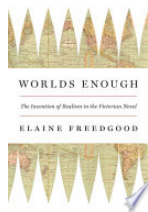



[Home](#)
[Editorial](#)
[Authors' Responses](#)
[Guidelines For Reviewers](#)
[About Us](#)
[Masthead](#)
[Feedback](#)

WORLDS ENOUGH: THE INVENTION OF REALISM IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL



By **Elaine Freedgood**
(Princeton, 2019) 184 pp.
Reviewed by **Renée Fox** on 2021-01-30.

[Click here for a PDF version.](#)

[Click here to buy the book on Amazon.](#)

This book is not just brilliant, sharp-witted, and field-changing (although it is all of those things). It is also a call for disciplinary and intellectual revolution, in both the political and etymological senses of the word. If we can look backward in our efforts to look forward in more ethical and antiracist directions, if we can learn how Victorian novels became canonized monoliths that block other novels from view, we can develop new reading practices that value the wide range of forms taken by novels in the world. "A key feature of literary criticism is that we often forget it," Freedgood writes at the beginning of her preface, and "Victorian literary criticism has been particularly forgettable" (x). This book refuses to forget. It aims as much to recall the critical fictions that created Victorian realism as to envision new critical paradigms for razing those fictions.

First and foremost, Freedgood recalls that "[f]or a long time, many Victorian novels were not all that great" (1). During the hundred years of literary criticism that preceded poststructuralism, Victorian novels were considered no match for the vaunted monuments of French realism. They were judged too long, too diegetic, too superficial, too lacking in dramatic unity and tragedy, too intrusively interrupted by smarmy narrators, and too generally defective. But even though early literary criticism dismissed Victorian novels as not mimetic enough, later literary criticism placed them firmly in a realist "tradition," or, more accurately, invented a tradition of realism that could accommodate Victorian novels, so long as we ignored all the ways in which their messy forms distended and fractured the contours of this newly formed tradition. "[G]enre is historically contingent," Freedgood argues, "and so is its criticism" (x-xi).

In explaining how the long history of criticism ultimately transformed the chaotic Victorian novel into a realist paragon of formal coherence and literary prestige, Freedgood paves the way for new critical practices in which no novels--especially the messy ones--need to assume Victorian realism as their point of departure. One of the many brilliant things about *Worlds Enough* is its sharp clarity, both of prose and of purpose. In the preface, Freedgood tells us precisely what her book aims to do and why: "This book seeks to find out how a literary-historical undoing can liberate the now-normative nineteenth-century British novel from its heavy centrality in Anglophone novel history and explore what we can read if we read against the grain of our entrenched sense of its 'realism' and formal coherence" (xii). This project of liberation opens our thinking about novels in multiple ways. In showing us how literary criticism created the concept of Victorian realism, Freedgood not only frees Victorian novels from their need to conform to its formal demands; she also frees Victorian studies, novel studies, narrative theory, and postcolonial studies from any assumption that the Victorian Novel must be accounted for in discussions of novels--even Victorian ones.

Further, in her penetrating analyses of the critical work that has produced Victorian realism as a literary apotheosis, Freedgood liberates future scholarship from the developmental narrative ingrained in this critical chronology. As a number of scholars have shown in recent years, decolonizing a literary field isn't just a matter of expanding the canon of primary texts we read. Decolonization also requires a reorientation of critical paradigms to include a more diverse and ecumenical set of critical voices. Taking this decolonizing project seriously, *Worlds Enough* models in its critical practice the need to grapple with emerging and BIPOC scholars (black, indigenous, people of color) who read against the grain of literary-historical dogma.

The preface of this book lays out the stakes of overthrowing Victorian realism as we know it. After an introduction that explains "How the Victorian Novel Became Realistic (in a French Way), Reactionary, and Great," five case studies illustrate formal ruptures in the diegetic worlds of Victorian novels, and a conclusion banishes (hopefully forever) the illusion that there is a stable "Western" form of the novel that makes all other kinds of novels peripheral. In Freedgood's words, "the idea of the periphery becomes more absurd than ever" when we remember that "literary form is assigned, not discovered, and novel form is infinitely adaptable (or we might say, findable)" (138).

Arguing that the greatness of the Victorian novel was produced and established only in the late twentieth century, Freedgood's introduction traces a familiar history of work done on Victorian novels by critics such as Wayne Booth, J. Hillis Miller, D. A. Miller, Gerard Genette, Roland Barthes, Fredric Jameson, Leah Price, Nicholas Dames, and John Plotz. But in order to defamiliarize this familiar critical lineage, the introduction also cites the opinions of earlier scholars and critics. Nineteenth-century critics like Henry James, we are reminded, dismissed the English novel for its "carelessness of dramatic unity" (6), and mid-twentieth-century critics like Dorothy Van Ghent and Barbara Hardy, we are told, "often concede[d] that

many nineteenth-century novels are a tough fit for various formal demands on the novel: tragic and Jamesian ones, chiefly" (9). In recalling that Victorian novels were once considered less than great, Freedgood not only shows how patently their greatness was a late twentieth-century ideological invention, but also asks how our reading practices could change if we emphasize the very imperfections in Victorian novels that more recent criticism has trained us to overlook. "It might be exciting," Freedgood writes, "to seek...the 'flaws' of novels we now treat as nearly perfect structures, if only to admit how random our canonical inclusions and exclusions are, and how many works we exclude from the greatness list are excluded for faults that the included works suffer (or benefit) from quite widely" (14-15).

In order to "restore the full address of the nineteenth-century novel," each of the book's five case studies highlights one of these "flaws" (x) --or, more specifically, each explores one of the ways in which metalepsis ruptures the fantasy of a novel's narrative coherence. Metalepsis, which denotes the fracturing of a novel's diegetic world by its multiple other ontological worlds, is the key formal principle on which Freedgood builds her argument. As Freedgood demonstrates in her case studies, "the Victorian novel--like most (or perhaps all) novels--is metafictional": the constant interruption of the Victorian novel's fictional world by omniscient narrators, its continual references to the historical world, and its regular inclusion of paratext all "ought to jolt us into an uncomfortable awareness of the impossibility of such multiple ontologies" (xvi). If twentieth-century criticism's invention of coherent Victorian realism reinforced ideas of imperial and social mastery, renewed attention to the metaleptic incoherencies in Victorian novels challenges the developmental critical narrative in which these novels are better than or even especially different from other novels. "Rather than continuing to naturalize (or simply deny) the fantasy of a coherent diegesis," Freedgood writes, "we might restore the discomfort of that situation, the diegetic instability of layers of narrative folding into one layer with all of us on the inside, unsure of who narrates whom" (xviii). In other words, by exposing "the masterful" and steady form of the Victorian realist novel as a critical fiction, Freedgood displaces it as the standard against which other novels need be measured. In its place she envisions a reading practice of "arbitrary assemblages" that can produce any number of new and different non-Anglo-Eurocentric critical frameworks for novels (xviii).

In an [online symposium about this book](#), Sukanya Bannerjee aptly writes that "*Worlds Enough* provincializes the Victorian realist novel" and in doing so "recharg[es] not only our study of Victorian Britain and its empire, but also the global literary map." Each of the book's five case studies (on denotation, omniscience, paratext, hetero-ontologicality, and reference) shows us clearly how this project of dismantling the Victorian novel's cultural and institutional primacy can work. By linking the narrative weirdness of Victorian novels to everything from counterfeit champagne to postmodern metafiction and African ghosts, these case studies transform familiar novels into jagged and unfamiliar phenomena. In her chapter on denotation, for instance, Freedgood reconceives the idea of "ballast"--that random material used to weigh down and stabilize ships, neither cargo nor trash, transformable, transferrable, forgettable, traveling "without qualities, but not without consequences" (49)--as a literary metaphor for both referentiality and the contingencies of reading. As Freedgood describes it, ballastic referentiality disrupts both the reality effect and the fictional world itself. While offering no immediate and apparent meaning, it always has purpose. Operating beneath the notice of history but nonetheless providing essential weight and balance, this accidental stuff can't yet be categorized but still materially affects the worlds through which it circulates. Indefinably open-ended, ballastic reference disallows the singular and seamless continuity between text and world that is one of realism's most necessary fictions. As a metaphor for reference and reading simultaneously, the ballastic thus "scuttles" the fantasy of a novel or "a world in which no mixing or miscegenation has happened and in which you, the writer, the critic, and the Victorian or Victorianist can land and bring no microorganisms or microbad attitudes along" (51). As Freedgood's analysis of ballast both in the world and in seafaring novels demonstrates, there is always "a cargo that is unaccounted for, undocumented, and unspecified, that is reacting and interacting with the text, the island, the world you engage" (52).

The remaining case studies highlight the discomfiting aspects of Victorian novels that late-twentieth-century criticism trained us to neglect in the same way that recorded history neglects ballast. These discomfiting but indispensable aspects, Freedgood shows, have remained out of sight to help the fiction of coherent realism sail steadily on. While focusing specifically on weird formal and narrative ruptures, her studies embed this weirdness in the politics of class, ecology, imperialism, and race and thus demonstrate how much the invention (and maintenance) of realism has been enmeshed in ideologies of Western power. Though free indirect discourse, for instance, can be used to mark class division, Freedgood argues that it can also become a metafictional imaginary in which poor characters who are not colonized by omniscient narrators "can or could, in the hands of a different writer in a different genre or century, potentially represent themselves" (72). Likewise, by analyzing paratextual apparatuses that bring multiple historical, temporal, and geographical worlds crashing into a novel's fictional world, Freedgood reveals other kinds of covert invasions that novels sanction: focus on the "bibliographic metalepsis" of paratext, she writes, can expose both "ecological imperialism" and the "elaborate conceit" of geographical borders (98, 92, 97). Historical novels, which ontologically entangle their fictional plots with real events like the Indian Mutiny, can be read as counterfactual fantasies in which "various kinds of being and beings mingle and mix." Such novels allow Freedgood to "imagine future worlds and ways of living with ourselves and all of the others we have evicted from having and inhabiting 'our own world'" (114). Finally, by comparing Victorian novels to ghost stories, Freedgood shows us how uncanny and world-rupturing it is to find fictional characters walking around amidst real, recognizable places and things. Whether or not we're reading a ghost story, such ghostly reference "promises relief from meaning, from guilt, and from the burden of history that it avows and then displaces onto the apparitional," and we would do well to read our way into a "more principled [kind of] ghostbusting" (131).

In her conclusion, Freedgood asks us also to read our way into a more principled kind of mythbusting. Returning to her scrutiny of the vocabulary and methodology of canonical literary criticism, she reiterates how much the Anglocentric "imagining of the novel has been inflected and infected by a racism that is somehow invisible to most observers" (135). Re-examining the non-Western critics that Franco Moretti uses to argue for the superiority of European novels in "Conjectures on World Literature" ([New Left Review](#), 2000), Freedgood shows how clearly the supposed failures of "peripheral" novels apply to all novels and aren't actually failures at all. Since forms travel, break apart, and reconstitute themselves as innovation, and since novels are messy and complicated, it's long past time, Freedgood writes, to dispense with the "aesthetic racism" that has made novels from one place somehow greater than novels from other places (139). Revealing how limiting--and how violent--the history of critically acceptable reading has been, Freedgood insists that we read "beyond, and further, and in what may be critically unacceptable ways" in order to decolonize our scholarship and our classrooms (98). By dismantling the greatness of Victorian novels in order to make novels at large more wondrous, *Worlds Enough* also

gives teachers and scholars of Victorian novels the chance to be better (better readers, better educators, better humans). And for that I am tremendously grateful.

Renée Fox is Assistant Professor of Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz

Leave a comment on Renée Fox's review.

Name:

Email:

Comments:



I'm not a robot

reCAPTCHA
[Privacy](#) - [Terms](#)

Submit

[About Us](#)

Copyright © Dartmouth College, 2008-2020