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Valdez, Jessica R., *Plotting the News in the Victorian Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. xi+193, £75.00 cloth.

In the opening pages of *Plotting the News in the Victorian Novel* Jessica R. Valdez takes issue with Benedict Anderson's seminal study *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Chief amongst the defects of Anderson's most famous work, Valdez believes, is the "formal" nature of his analysis. In this regard, Valdez argues, Anderson sees no difference "between the fictiveness of the novel and that of the newspaper." Moreover, Anderson "fails to attend to textual and generic specifics as well as theories of how these media work," and "he collapses distinctions between the novel and the newspaper and treats them as stable categories" (3-4). Whether or not one agrees with Valdez's assessment of Anderson's work or not, *Plotting the News* thus positions itself as providing a corrective to Anderson's theory of the nation via an interrogation of "the nineteenth-century novel's varying approaches to conceiving the newspaper as a form, system, genre, or collection of genres" (6). Further, Valdez explains her monograph looks at: "scholarly claims that the novel and the newspaper analogise the nation in parallel ways;" "suggests that novelistic depictions of newspapers represent a continued project of articulating and theorizing narrative realisms;" and "is a story of the novel; [...] not a history of the periodical or the newspaper" (3, 6, 17).

As such, Valdez straddles a position somewhere between the New Historicist and New Formalist perspectives Rachael Scarborough King so adroitly identifies in her recent review essay in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Scarborough King reviews three books: *Cyberformalism: Histories of Linguistic Forms in the Digital Archive* (2018) by Daniel Shore; *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (2019) by Anna Kornbluh; and *Character as Form* (2019) by Aaron Kunin. Engaging with Kornbluh's

monograph, which takes much of its evidence from the nineteenth century, Scarborough King writes: “Forms exist across registers, but literary texts make particularly clear how crucial they are to the construction of a shared world. Rather than borrowing from historical or sociological methods, literary critics should affirm the literary” (“The Frontiers of Form,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 19, 2020). And formalism, according to Kornbluh, is the best method for doing so.

We can see from this summary of the New Formalist mode how such a position relates to Valdez’s thesis that “many nineteenth-century novels explore the effects of form making on characters and communities” (20). Chapter one of Valdez’s “story of the novel” focuses on Charles Dickens and argues that Dickens was an author who, despite, or perhaps because of, his many years working in journalism, increasingly “valorised the artifice involved in narrative constructions of imagined worlds” (27).

Chapter two, “Arrested Development: Characterisation, the Newspaper and Anthony Trollope” examines Trollope’s fictional depictions of journalists and newspapers. Valdez takes on Matthew Rubery’s *The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction after the Invention of the News* (2009), asserting that Rubery’s thesis considers “Trollope’s fictional newspapers” as “often foster[ing] a ‘whispering conscience’ in his characters” (89). By contrast, Valdez contends that in *The Warden* (1855), and in the Palliser novels, newspapers do not facilitate shifts in the conscience of their characters but rather they immobilize them, and any development thereafter is in spite of, rather than because of, journalistic intervention. Valdez writes persuasively of Plantagenet Palliser’s alienation and Septimus Harding’s awakening to the privilege of his position. However, this reviewer finds no real disagreement between Valdez’s argument and Rubery’s that Trollope depicts newspapers as “invasive”, disruptive documents that occasion *crise de conscience* in characters who encounter “opposing arguments” in the press and are paralysed as a result (Rubery, *The Novelty of*

Newspapers, Oxford University Press, 2009, 102, 103, 96). For Rubery, Trollope's representation of the journalist and the newspaper press as perniciously one-sided is a deliberate "foil" for the novel and the authorial voice which, in Trollope's fiction at least, presents a multiplicity of viewpoints and a space for characters to deliberate (Rubery, 106). For Valdez too, the "two-dimensional" newspaper causes a "crisis of conscience" in Trollope's characters which leads to the conclusion that only "novelistic poetics" can represent the necessary heterogeneity of society (77, 76, 81).

Chapter three focuses on two famous examples of sensation fiction: Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1862-3), and Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* (1864-6). Valdez sets *Armadale* in conversation with Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1864-6) in the context of their publication alongside each other in the *Cornhill Magazine*. The analysis in this chapter, which draws out sensational elements in Gaskell's "Every-Day Story", chimes with the work of Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa SurrIDGE in, "The Plot Thickens: Toward a Narratological Analysis of Illustrated Serial Fiction in the 1860s," which concentrates on "illustration and layout as key constituents of plot rather than mere biblio-graphical paratext" (Leighton and SurrIDGE, "The Plot Thickens," *Victorian Studies*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2008, 68). Leighton and SurrIDGE demonstrate that as *Wives and Daughters* moved to lead serial in *Cornhill* in July 1865, taking over from *Armadale*, George "Du Maurier's illustrations deploy sensational effects in Gaskell's realist text to suggest Molly's unconventional behaviour" (Leighton and SurrIDGE, 95).

The final chapter of *Plotting the News* reflects on the position of the Anglo-Jewish community in nineteenth-century London as refracted through *The Jewish Standard*, George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), and Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto: A Study of a Peculiar People* (1892)—which is missing from the book's bibliography. Valdez also

compares Zangwill's editor-character Raphael Leon to Eliot's Will Ladislaw from *Middlemarch* (1871-2).

Concluding with a postscript and a return to theoretical deliberations about form, Valdez stages a disagreement with Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015). She pits Levine's concept of forms as necessarily containing limitations as well as possibilities against her own, before ultimately agreeing that literary forms can ascribe "particular sets of potentialities" just as they can challenge and modify  (169).

Whilst *Plotting the News* might have benefitted from having fewer antagonists and rather more interlocuters, it is an inventive, thought-provoking investigation of a variety of nineteenth-century novels in dialogue with the evolution of the newspaper press.

Helena Goodwyn

Northumbria University

Bio:

Dr Helena Goodwyn is Vice-Chancellor's Senior Research Fellow in English Literature at Northumbria University, Newcastle. Her work has featured in the *Journal of Victorian Culture*, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, and *Women's Writing* (forthcoming). Her first monograph, *The Americanization of W. T. Stead*, will be published by Edinburgh University Press.

