

## Reviews

TALIA SCHAFFER, *Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. xx + 274. \$45.

The best critical books afford readers new perspectives not only on familiar nineteenth-century texts, but also on something yet more familiar and perhaps therefore even more in need of a fresh view: their own lives as readers, critics, teachers, colleagues, partners, friends, and parents. *Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction* is such a book. Talia Schaffer's description and theorization of a world that is profoundly, imperfectly interrelational, one in which we are immersed in networks where our varied roles shift and change around the fulcrum of care, is both deeply Victorian and urgently contemporary. Readers will find in it a paradigm for thinking about the history of the novel and its representation of individual subjectivity and complex social groupings, and they will find in Schaffer a writer dedicated to thinking communally about how to use the tools we have honed as scholars to build better communities and to lead more responsive professional and personal lives.

Schaffer draws from feminist philosophy, sociology, disability studies, and queer studies to turn the definition of care away from the realm of feeling, where it has traditionally been assigned to women—often women of color—on its way to becoming invisible and undervalued labor. In Schaffer's handling, care is not a feeling; it is an action. Care is *meeting the needs of another*. It is remarkable how this reorientation from sympathy to action alters the way we might see the care relationship: who cares, how, and why. It also changes how we might think about the difference between “good” and “bad” care, although, as Schaffer notes, poor care is better than none, and adequate care is enough to survive. The best care, according to Schaffer, happens in the small groupings that she terms communities of care, dynamic and flexible collectives that form around a “cared-for” and later reverse course as carers come to require care. Successful care communities are egalitarian, voluntary, and grounded on clear and

ongoing communication among members. They also endure through each iterative performance of care—which might produce but does not necessarily proceed from emotion—and through the skewed time of caregiving that collapses then and now. Such groupings fan out the intense pressure of the care dyad that can lock a carer and a cared-for into static, unequal roles, and they allow for all group members to contribute and be valued.

Readers of Victorian novels will immediately recognize this structure. The found families and informal social networks that form around and through acts of mutual care are familiar to us from so many Victorian bedrooms, hampers of food, and daily neighborhood calls. Indeed, the care community is not new; it predates the medicalization of illness and the outsourcing of care that began in earnest in the mid-nineteenth century, when the professionalization of medicine replaced informal care groups with doctors and hospitals, friends and neighbors with paid caregivers. When communities of care appear in novels from the later nineteenth century, then, they do so to recuperate a social formation that was disappearing and sometimes to critique the failures of modernity, which replaced the ordinary body—the fragile, suffering body that is common to all of us—with the normative body that produces its pathological opposite as requiring professional attention. Readers of Shaffer will hear a structural echo of her previous book in this history of a lost social formation. Like *Communities of Care*, Schaffer's *Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016) focuses on collectivist practices that were gradually overwritten by the culture of progressive individualism, but that persisted within the pages of the novel as an alternative to the history of the subject as we have known and written it. In *Communities of Care*, as in that previous work, Schaffer offers examples that straddle a historical divide and demonstrates the persistence of a residual model that existed throughout the century as a potential reality and a mourned object. Readers of *Romance's Rival* will find *Communities of Care* to be a worthy companion piece and an extension of Schaffer's thinking about the communal subject and what it is to lead a valuable, ethical life alongside others.

Those others, as it turns out, are both all around us in the actual world and waiting for us in the pages of the nineteenth-century novel, where the Victorians themselves worked out their complicated and shifting relationship to care in a lower-stakes virtual environment. Care fails as often as it succeeds in Schaffer's treatment, and the failures are crucial for the way they show how to meet (or not) another's

need and how much care is enough. Three of six chapters in *Communities of Care* focus on the fictional representation of care groupings, from the late-Romantic and early-Victorian years—when voluntary care communities were still the functional norm and writers like Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Charlotte Brontë understood care as local social enmeshment—to the mid-Victorian period, when the centralization of public health led to an outsourcing of care. Two Brontë novels can illustrate the historical shift: Schaffer reads *Jane Eyre* (1847) as a meditation on domestic care and *Villette* (1853) as a narrative about migration that critiques the alienated labor of paid caregiving. Reading Lucy Snowe as an early example of a migrant caregiver helps make sense not only of her difficulty in forming affective and mutually reciprocal bonds but also of her notoriously defended narrational style, and it also places *Villette* in a new intertextual landscape that is both more international and more racially diverse. Schaffer treats George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) as the functional obverse of Lucy's story: Daniel must learn how to feel less and act more so that he can form a functional care community and forge an idea of the nation as care community (what Schaffer calls "care citizenship" [p. 139]). Essentially, Daniel needs to take to heart the thesis of *Communities of Care*: care is an action, not a feeling.

As valuable as Schaffer's treatment of represented Victorian care communities may be, the real excitement comes in the next two chapters, which step back from the represented fictional world to portray extradiegetic acts of reading and writing as forms of care. Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) not only thematizes care but also requires it: the novel's famous silences and famously difficult style invoke a reader who will care for the text, performing an act of reparative reading. (Schaffer's treatment of silence in James is oddly silent on the specifics of Jamesian style and thus creates an opportunity for future work.) Charlotte Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) calls together a community not of caring readers but of writers, imagined here as a collaborative and intertextual network that operates through time. The focus on Yonge's compositional strategy, which allows Schaffer to double back to midcentury and to break up the smooth chronological rise of a complicated history, provides the thread of collectivist creation that Schaffer follows into academic writing and through to the end of her book.

The Victorian chapters of *Communities of Care* are framed by contemporary chapters that locate care in twenty-first-century activist and theoretical traditions and then consider what academic departments and universities might look like if they were structured as

communities of care. Don't worry: Schaffer does not call on us to be nicer, less critical colleagues, as if simply sweetening up academe would solve its entrenched problems. On the contrary, Schaffer sees attentive, rigorous criticism as an act of care, and she offers us a model for creating greater equity around academic service—a form of necessary, invisible, and undervalued labor that falls unevenly on female and BIPOC academics. She asks herself how care might reorient our teaching lives, our local engagement, and our scholarly practices. She allows the act of care, moreover, to transform her own scholarly practice: her more conversational tone and direct reader address call us into a reciprocal community of scholars, as does her citational practice, which not only models what it means to do criticism with others but also brings fresh, often marginalized voices into the conversation.

Although *Communities of Care* was begun before the SARS Covid-19 pandemic, it is a timely and urgent book to read now, at what one hopes, optimistically, may be near the end of it, and when so many of us have found ourselves sustained by giving and receiving care. If you are weary with much that has been accepted as inescapable within our profession; if you are filled with the hope of doing things differently, better; if you want to read a work of careful criticism that has already thought about what you might bring to it and what you might require; or if you just want to lay down your own burdens long enough to read about someone else's fictional care circle, then, reader, *Communities of Care* may meet your needs.

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TOM NURMI, *Magnificent Decay: Melville and Ecology*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020. Pp. xvi + 276. \$65 cloth; \$32.50 paper.

Tom Nurmi's *Magnificent Decay: Melville and Ecology* is an exemplary work of environmental humanities. It puts Herman Melville's writing in dialogue with environmental science in three time frames: that of his own time, that of the science associated with the rise of "ecology" in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that of the present-day science and theory of the Anthropocene. The book's central claim is that Melville's literary works explore the notion of an interconnected planetary experience in which humans cannot be separated from the mineral, plants and