Kevin A. Morrison (ed.), *The Companion to Victorian Popular Fiction*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018, 312 pp.

US \$45 (paperback)

ISBN 9781476669038

Anne-Louise Russell

Kevin Morrison notes in his editorial preface that “[a]lthough companions to certain aspects of popular fiction have been published, there has not been, until now, a single volume devoted to popular fiction in its entirety” (1). The *Companion to Victorian Popular Fiction* provides an encyclopaedic guide with more than 300 alphabetically-organised, cross-referenced entries ranging in length from only 100 words to approximately 2,000 words. This format is similar to *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction* (Second Edition, 2009), edited by John Sutherland. However, Morrison’s focus on popular fiction makes an important distinction. Drawing on the wide range of research interests of 157 contributors, the *Companion* provides a valuable resource with entries covering “representative fictional works ..., biographical sketches of ... writers and their publishers, topics that concerned them, and the popular genres they helped to establish, shape or refine” (1). In addition to its use as a reference work that provides a tool for understanding the vast scope of Victorian popular fiction, the *Companion*’s compact form makes it a pleasure to browse.

There are biographical entries for many critically neglected authors in addition to writers who are more familiar to modern readers, for example, Charles Dickens and Rudyard Kipling. Some contributors have indicated where an author appears in reference works such as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. This information will benefit students who wish to undertake further work and could be usefully supplemented with details of further biographical works on specific authors. Within the single volume *Companion* there is not space to list the entire literary output of prolific authors such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon who, as Janine Hatter points out, “penned around eighty novels, 150 short stories, nine plays, and a volume of poetry” (31). However, the *Companion* includes individual entries on five of Braddon’s novels and some of

her other fiction is discussed in relation to various genres and topics. The ample cross-referencing makes these easy to locate. Many entries on individual novels follow a plot synopsis with summaries of existing scholarship, and some contributors suggest avenues for further work by highlighting how a novel might relate to specific research interests. For example, Sarah L. Lennox suggests that Braddon's understudied novel, *Henry Dunbar* (1864), "would interest scholars who examine the performativity of social class and gender, false identities, and crime in sensation fiction" and "discussions of sensation fiction's influence on detective fiction" (110).

The *Companion* contains an impressive array of entries on topics that concerned Victorian writers of popular fiction. The subjects that are addressed include: Alcoholism, Anti-Semitism, Class, Cricket, Grave Robbing, Hysteria, Medicine, the Occult and Vampires. Elizabeth Steere's entry on Class exemplifies how some contributors discuss the ways in which a specific topic is handled by various authors in a range of novels. Steere highlights how the issue of class is addressed by writers including Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Walter Besant, Ellen Wood, William Makepeace Thackeray, Florence Marryat, William Harrison Ainsworth, Sheridan Le Fanu and Charles Dickens. Her wide-ranging discussion covers the class anxieties that accompanied the rise in literacy rates, the fears provoked by the cross-class appeal of genres such as sensation fiction, portrayals of social fall or upward mobility, the depiction of the dangers of novel-reading, and how authors including Dickens "exposed the hypocrisies and arbitrariness of the British class system" (51). Within a short entry, she offers an incisive and insightful discussion of some of the many ways in which concerns relating to class emerge in popular fiction. This is a good example of how the *Companion* provides concise and accessible information for students.

The diversity of Victorian popular fiction is emphasised by the inclusion of entries addressing over twenty different genres. These include: Detective Fiction, Fairy Tales, Gothic Fiction, Invasion Literature, Melodrama, Sensation Fiction, Shilling Shockers and Temperance Fiction. Annemarie McAllister's entry provides a succinct source of information about Temperance Fiction. She outlines how stories that addressed the evils of alcohol were serialised in periodicals, and distributed in tracts and pamphlets, and she discusses novels with temperance-inspired themes and their authors. Her summaries of the approaches taken in recent studies of temperance fiction help to identify the scope for further work to be undertaken, which she notes will become more practical as further digital resources become available. (It is perhaps surprising that digital resources are not mentioned more often in the *Companion* as current work on Victorian fiction is often facilitated by the recent exponential growth in digital resources and material.) Not all entries on genres address recent trends in research or the areas where further work is needed. For example, in his entry on "Sensation Fiction," Alberto Gabriele summarises his work on sensationalism as "one of the dominant tropes of industrial modernity" (215), and this could usefully be supplemented with reference to the growing body of scholarship on the genre. This could include how sensation fiction has been studied in relation to diverse topics

including class and race, the theatre, religion, science, medicine, disability, law, illustration, queer studies, spiritualism and the supernatural etc.

In conclusion, the *Companion* provides a significant and unique addition to the texts available to those working on Victorian popular fiction. As well as providing students with accessible information on texts, authors, topics and genres, the *Companion* generates ideas for new directions in scholarship. The inclusion of details about relevant research networks, such as the Invasion Network and the Short Story Network, helps to foster collaboration by bringing together researchers and scholars with shared interests. The entry on the Victorian Popular Fiction Association guides the reader towards opportunities for the dissemination of new research inspired by this valuable resource.

Recommended citation

Russell, Anne Louise. 2019. Review of Kevin A. Morrison (ed.), *The Companion to Victorian Popular Fiction*. *Victorian Popular Fictions*. 1.1: 121-123.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46911/WDJQ7354>