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REVIEWS

Troy J. Bassett, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Three-Volume Novel*, New Directions in Book History (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), xvii, 256 pp., ISBN 978-3-030-31925-0 (hardcover), ISBN 978-3-030-31926-7 (e-book)

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Troy J. Bassett's book reconsiders a staple of nineteenth-century fiction, the three-volume novel, as a literary and economic product. Following Bassett's review of scholarly work in the first chapter, the second, titled "The Production of Multi-Volume Fiction, 1837–1898," offers a bibliometric overview of novel production before turning to the industry's underlying economics, from the perspectives of both publishers and libraries. The chapter includes lengthy tables and figures, as well as detailed statistical summaries of the three-volume novels listed on Bassett's own online database: *At the Circulating Library: A Database of Victorian Fiction, 1837–1901* (2007–present). This summary of extensive quantitative research provides a multifaceted view of the Victorian novel – including attention to format (i.e., number of volumes), authorship, genre, nationality, and gender – which receives further attention later in the book and sets up the case studies that follow.

Chapter 3, "The Experience of Richard Bentley and Son," examines the publishing accounts of more than a hundred three-volume novels published by Bentley between 1865 and 1890, to assess the costs of production and financial viability of the three-volume novel for Victorian publishers. This case study is notable for its insights into the relationships between publishers, authors, and libraries, and

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demonstrates how and why the three-volume format was successful. Chapter 4, "Buying, Renting, and Selling the Multi-volume Novel: The Economics of W. H. Smith and Son's Subscription Library," considers the business model of the circulating library through a study of the accounts of the second-largest such library of the Victorian period. The focus on publishing practices and the library system, in chapters 3 and 4, emphasizes the economics of publishing.

The fifth and final chapter, "De-monopolizing Literary Space: Alternatives to the Three-Volume Novel," describes how the one-volume novel, in terms of both physical format and literary content, came to dominate the market for longer fiction. Emerging and smaller publishers, such as Hutchinson, Heinemann, and Constable, published new fiction which differed from that available in three-volume format at the circulating libraries. Their success in reaching a middle-class audience able and willing to purchase, rather than borrow, defined the shift from the three-volume novel to the one-volume novel in the 1890s. From Robert Louis Stevenson and the new romance, George Moore and literary censorship, J. W. Arrowsmith and T. Fisher Unwin, to series publication, the material that Bassett covers to support his explanation for how this transformation was successful is wide-ranging and fascinating. The result is a description of the novel amid a wider discussion of gender, social values, and publishing practices.

Bassett argues that the one-volume novel was a means for men to reappropriate the novel in material and literary terms. Initially, the three-volume novel was seen as serious and the one-volume novel as more appropriate for juvenile readers. According to Bassett, the publication of Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) in one volume, along with other novels by popular male authors such as Rider Haggard, heralded a shift in literary production that left "women authors behind to write multi-volume library novels" (194). Starting with the three-volume edition of Walter Scott's first historical novel, *Waverley* (1814), the unprecedented reception of the *Waverley* novels that followed over several decades had helped make the multi-volume novel the standard format for authors and publishers looking to establish a literary reputation. However, many three-volume library novels were written

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by women. Moreover, domestic fiction and romance novels emphasizing the lived experiences of women and girls were widely read through the library system. The resulting denigration of a "library audience" in the Victorian period stemmed in part from "gendered arguments which presented the library novel as feminine and infantile in contrast to the new format as masculine and adult" (185). Perhaps not coincidentally, sensation novels featuring the personal lives of female protagonists, by authors like Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Price Wood, were exceedingly popular in the 1860s, by which time the *Waverley* novels, frequently characterized by male exploration of war and politics, were available in downmarket, one-volume editions. By the 1880s, while women led the market for three-volume novels, the supposed masculinity of one-volume adventure novels signalled a new mode, if not new directions, in middle-class reading.

As also described by George Moore's opposition to the censorship of the library system, the shifts from three volumes to one volume, and from borrowing to purchasing, were implicated in the socialization of middle-class reading practices. The libraries acted as censors of the three-volume novel: Mudie's Library, Moore's primary foe, shaped the act of reading as a moral endeavour through the calculated selection of three-volume novels aimed at a discerning reader. Censorship did not disappear with the emergence of the one-volume novel; the courts ensured that the content of novel reading would adhere to existing social norms. As Bassett writes, "censorship practices developed in response to the new mode of literary production" (208). More importantly, accessibility was not driven by the top-down determination of acceptable reading practices; Bassett makes clear that the public served as the foundation for policing communal expectations. The role of social valuation in the construction of reading practices is again apparent in Bassett's assessment of the series as the means to further popular reading of known, but especially new, works of fiction in the one-volume format, with Arrowsmith's 3/6 series as a prominent example of the fluid, nuanced relationship between format and reception. Building on his description, in the earlier chapters, of the three-volume novel as a commodity exploited by authors,

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publishers, and libraries, Bassett's reconsideration of the transition to the one-volume novel in the 1890s, in terms of community concerns as well as economic conditions, broadens his investigation into the intersection of material history and literary invention.

Bassett delineates the rise and fall of the three-volume novel through quantitative research into the history of book production, offering a contrast to commonplace outlines of the popularity of the novel in the Victorian period. His book provides historical background on commercial and political, literary and material aspects of novel production that would work well as a supplement to an upper-level undergraduate or graduate-level course focused on Victorian novels or modern book history. The charts, tables, figures, and statistics, derived from Bassett's *At the Circulating Library* database, provide a foundation for case studies that unravel the complexities of popular reading practices. In this way, the book is also a useful example of scholarship that bridges empirical research and literary analysis, pointing to possibilities for exploration into the three-volume novel and the history of popular reading more generally. Finally, the case studies in chapters 3 and 4, but especially chapter 5, are well-grounded narratives of social power and literary production in the everyday life of a reading nation adapting to new technologies and forging new social practices. In this respect, the book points indirectly to the bearing of nineteenth-century material culture on current concerns with genre, gatekeeping, and meaning-making in a digital world.

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