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Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction

by Talia Schaffer. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2021, Xvii + 274 pp., \$45.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-691-19963-4

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BOOK REVIEW

Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction, by Talia Schaffer.
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Who can forget the heart-warming scene in *The Old Curiosity Shop* when Dick Swiveller recovers enough to realize that he has been nursed back to life by the “small servant” he dubs “The Marchioness.” Swiveller finds himself surrounded by a small band of friends and, of course, the Marchioness, who prepares and feeds him toast and tea, washes his face and hands, and brushes his hair. Dick submits “in a kind of grateful astonishment beyond the reach of language” (2000, 491). The episode gains resonance because *The Old Curiosity Shop* taunts its readers with spectacular failures of care and ends, famously, with Little Nell’s death. Readers of Talia Schaffer’s new book, *Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction*, will undoubtedly find themselves, like me, returning to nearly every nineteenth-century novel they’ve read to reconsider representations of caregiving, which Schaffer convincingly presents as a foundational form of human relationships. But her book does so much more: it invites us also to ponder the many ways that caregiving structures our own experiences and relationships, particularly in our fraught pandemic times.

Schaffer’s book has four richly developed chapters that center around major novels – *Villette*, *Daniel Deronda*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Heir of Redclyffe* – novels where examples of care (whether in the form of nursing, teaching, or parenting) are center-stage. But these chapters are provocatively framed both at the book’s beginning and end by wide-ranging chapters that develop and explore care ethics, that think through the implications for care communities today, and that articulate ways to inculcate an ethics of care into our work as readers, critics, and colleagues.

Perhaps the most essential move that Schaffer makes at the get-go is to insist that care is not a feeling, one we might associate with affectionate concern, but rather an ongoing action, practiced over time. Although she delineates the positive components of good care as action – “attending to others, acknowledging others, helping others, respecting others” (20), her purpose is not to indoctrinate or still less to send us off on close-reading expeditions designed to find examples to applaud. In her introduction’s opening address to her readers, she warns us that she will dispense with “the pleasant platitudes of care” and invite us to consider care as a practice: “difficult, often unpleasant, almost always underpaid, sometimes ineffective” but defining the lives of nineteenth-century subjects (1). Understood as an action, care is, most simply, “meeting another’s need” (35). As Schaffer’s chapter on “Care Communities Today” develops, we are also asked to table our tendency to read personhood into literary character, and to probe for revelations of deep selves. Instead, we will read relationships and focus on communities; these might be thought of as the flyover country of the nineteenth-century novel, the land between the individual and the crowd, but the place where, Schaffer argues, the “foundational concerns of Victorian culture” were most effectively registered (13).

Our reorientation is not limited to what we are focusing on when we read nineteenth-century novels, or when we consider our own lives and the structures of care within them, but is reflected in how we go about the critical act of interpretation. Reparative reading and “care-full critique” are the tools with which Schaffer applies ethics of care philosophy

to literary criticism and cultural analysis. In this vein, one of my favorite sentences in *Communities of Care* is Schaffer's unabashed description of her methodology and purpose: "I want to celebrate the lumpy oddness of a conglomeration of feminist philosophy, disability studies, modern sociology, nineteenth-century cultural history, and literary scenes," she writes (27).

If Schaffer draws carefully (and care-fully) on the work of feminist theorists and care ethicists to strengthen her argument and to provide a "schematic version" of a care community, she relies as well on Jürgen Habermas's ideas about the public sphere, which she reads as an "imagined community" that, like the care community, unites people with common concerns and operates through discourse and develops over time (47). The differences between the two, however, are crucial: "the care community wants to meet another's need, while the public sphere wants to figure out the best policy; the care community coalesces with a certain urgency, while the public sphere is ongoing; the care community converses about personal feeling, while the public sphere members debate logical options" (58).

A chapter on "Austen, Dickens, and Brontë: Bodies Before the Normate" is essential to Schaffer's historical argument. Here she charts the changes in medical understanding that inaugurated a shift away from older models of communal caregiving characterized by the ubiquitous sickrooms one finds in nearly every Victorian novel with the afflicted one attended by small groups of caregivers, "ad-hoc, flexible," and "usually composed of voluntary connections" (2000, 61). This configuration of care gave way, in a "troubled transition," to a seemingly more pragmatic model with medical professionals (whether doctors or nurses) hired for their expertise, a model that Schaffer refers to, following the lead of disability scholars, as "the normate." Schaffer masterfully shows how works of fiction as disparate as Austen's "Sanditon" and *Persuasion*, Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* depict pre-normate care communities as a "default way of dealing with sickness" (87). "As the century moved further into professionalization, institutionalization, uniformity, and state-sponsored caregiving," she writes, "fiction remembered these loving-groups, re-created them, and, in so doing, showed how such groups might work" (87).

Case-study chapters make good on all the rich preparatory work of the first two chapters. Schaffer reads Lucy Snowe as "modern migrant global care-giver" (companion, nursery-governess, and schoolteacher), a service worker exposed to daily micro-aggressions and sufferer from the accumulations of emotional labor. *Daniel Deronda* works well as a follow-up chapter to Schaffer's study of *Villette* because, as she points out, "late novels often revisit care and suffering" (118). Her highly nuanced reading finds Eliot moving away from the sympathy so fully advocated for in earlier works like *Middlemarch*. In *Daniel Deronda* Eliot reaches beyond sympathy to an ethics of care, "an action-based, performative set of deeds" that strive to articulate an ideal sort of "care citizenship" (139). Schaffer's orientation shifts considerably in her chapter on *The Wings of the Dove*, which poses a provocative question: "can literary style produce a care community?" (147). Here Schaffer enlists readers into the work of "caring for a fragile text," the formalist perspective enabling us to consider care as a paradigm that "structures forms of reading, writing, and academic practice" (141). She cogently summarizes Milly Theale's situation this way: "she is treated with something like care – but it is composed of negations" (157).

The final "case study" chapter in *Communities of Care* is devoted to *The Heir of Redclyffe*, a work that enables Schaffer to return to mid-century medical models that informed Charlotte Brontë's study of care in *Villette* but to argue that Charlotte Yonge, like Henry James, "made care the basis of a particular kind of literary style" (160), in this case one uniquely relevant to our own work. "What would it mean to emphasize community as a condition for writing, to seek a kind of writing that synthesizes multiple voices and creatively reworks many texts," Schaffer asks when she pivots from her rich reading of *The Heir of Redclyffe* to closing

reflections that pave the way for her final chapter, aptly titled “Critical Care.” Here Schaffer directs her attention to academic readers, making a case for just how urgent it is to bring care and a communal model to academia.

Talia Schaffer acknowledges early on the serendipity of *Communities of Care* coming into being in tandem with the pandemic, achieving a kind of relevance infrequently experienced by academic authors. Remember the early pandemic joke that spread like a virus on social media, the one that said that living in the pandemic was like living in an Austen novel? Schaffer’s book will have all readers thinking hard about what sorts of conditions enable care communities to form, to prosper, or to fail. Like Dick Swiveller, moved by the generous care of the “little servant,” I don’t quite have the language to express my gratitude for *Communities of Care*, a book that care-fully reimagines new, reparative ways of understanding how we read, individually, and what we might do, together.

Notes on contributor

Maria Frawley is a professor of English at The George Washington University, where she teaches courses in nineteenth-century literature. She is co-editor of the recent *Routledge Companion to Jane Austen* (2021) and is at work on a study of Austen’s language titled *Keywords of Jane Austen’s Fiction*. In addition, she has published widely on nineteenth-century medical history and women writers, including Charlotte Brontë, Anne Brontë, and Harriet Martineau.

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Dickens, Charles. 2000. *The Old Curiosity Shop (1840-1841)*, edited by Norman Page. London: Penguin Books.

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