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## The Way We Read Victorian Fiction Now: Penguin and Neo-Victorian Book Design

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### **Abstract:**

Since the publication of the Red Classics in 2006, Penguin's approach to Classics' publishing has been particularly innovative. Series such as the Clothbound Classics, Books for Boys and Victorian Bestsellers have departed from the traditional image of the Penguin Classics. In this article, I consider further the marketing and physical appearance of these new series, analysing the rationale behind the selection of texts, the wording of publicity copy, and the packaging and cover-art of the individual volumes. My main claim is that these texts can be read as neo-Victorian products. I demonstrate that they recall key features of Victorian book design, but do so self-consciously, mixing in hybrid, modern elements. This repackaging of Victorian novels is, I argue, significantly shaped by both the increasing visibility of neo-Victorian fiction, and by changing attitudes to Victorianism and Victorian print culture evident since the late twentieth century.

**Keywords:** Coralie Bickford-Smith, book design, cover-art, Richard Green, materiality, neo-Victorian, Penguin Classics, print culture, popular fiction.

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**T**raditionally we are advised not to judge a book by its cover. Sometimes, however, surface appearances demand our attention. On *A Writer's Blog*, Jen Ferguson recounts a specific instance of her own cover lust in some detail:

I stumbled upon a very nice looking book perusing the shelves at my local Chapters, I gathered a copy of *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* into my hands and found a chair so I could admire them both more closely. Although name recognition got me to take a closer look at Collins's books, what sold me, was the awesome covers.

I don't really know how someone can pass these up. They are way more interesting than the book covers you

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normally see on classic literature. And in a way, these covers, while modern, colourful and cool, remind me of the classic Penguin Books covers. You know, the striking orange ones. (Ferguson 2010: n.p., original punctuation)

The book covers she enthusiastically describes are those designed for the Penguin Victorian Bestsellers Series, a ten-volume collection of popular Classics not only by Wilkie Collins but also other authors, including Mary Elizabeth Braddon, William Harrison Ainsworth and Edward Bulwer Lytton. This particular series, which I first encountered by chance at my local campus bookshop, intrigued me too; like Ferguson I was struck by the “awesome”, “colourful” covers that seemed so different from the more sober-looking appearance of other Classics series. When I started to look beyond the bold covers, I soon realised that the Victorian Bestsellers Series was far from an isolated phenomenon. Instead, as I will go on to argue, it is part of a broader cultural trend that has seen Penguin Classics in particular present a number of Victorian texts with strikingly modern designs.<sup>1</sup> What follows further explores the meanings of these repackaged Classics. Not only are these attractive objects difficult for consumers to resist; they also tell us much about an aspect of the reception of classic Victorian texts in the present cultural moment.

This essay’s main argument, simply put, is that all of these series can be interpreted as neo-Victorian products. My aim is not to claim that Penguin intentionally marketed their new Penguin Classics editions as neo-Victorian. I have found no direct evidence to confirm such an assumption; indeed it seems sensible to agree with Margaret D. Stetz’s hypothesis that, as a promotional term, neo-Victorian is “largely unused by writers, readers, reviewers, librarians, or booksellers outside of academe” (Stetz 2012: 340). As I will argue, however, the various elements of the series, from the publicity copy and the texts chosen to the cover-art and its reception with readers like Jen Ferguson, can convincingly be read as neo-Victorian, in the sense of self-consciously engaging, repurposing and commodifying the products of the period.

Consideration of the packaging of literature, rather than the literature itself, might appear at first a rather superficial business. It is certainly tempting to dismiss such paratextual concerns as marginally important ones that drag us away from the significant work of close reading. Yet, as Nicole

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Matthews has recently argued in introducing an invaluable collection of essays on cover design, they provide a richer terrain for cultural analysis than we might imagine. Thus, to take just one example:

Covers often relate a book to others in the same series, by the same author, set in a similar place or time, or to film and television versions of the same work. In all these ways, the materiality of the book's cover – its fonts, illustrations and layout – generates a great deal of meaning. (Matthews 2007: xi)

Hence book covers actively contribute to the way that the nineteenth century is collectively – and often selectively – remembered by and remediated for present-day society.

A number of critics of contemporary neo-Victorianism certainly agree with Matthew's insight and have paid some attention to the marketing of neo-Victorian fictions as well as their more obviously literary qualities. In *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*, for instance, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn notably include illustrations of the covers of novels by Belinda Starling, Jane Harris, Barbara Chase-Riboud and Diane Setterfield. The authors' discussion of the striking cover-art produced for Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007) and Harris's *The Observations* (2006) is representative of its sensitivity in handling the material as well as aesthetic features of texts. As Heilmann and Llewellyn summarise, "[a] self-conscious play with paratextuality, in Gérard Genette's sense, is an important feature of these novels, and indeed, of most of the neo-Victorian fictions examined in this book" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 111). Their response to this self-consciousness in the marketing of neo-Victorian works therefore echoes their broader, field-defining description of contemporary neo-Victorianism as an "act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis). In her coda to *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*, Louisa Hadley also touches upon the appearance of neo-Victorian novels. Much like other definitions in her study, however, her interpretation of "the marketing of neo-Victorian fiction" plays down self-consciousness, instead noting that such writing "emphasizes its connection to Victorian

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fiction, and often encourages readers to view it as a replica of Victorian fiction” by publishing covers with “images which clearly identify the texts as concerned with the Victorian era, such as the Pre-Raphaelite images on the cover of *Possession*” (Hadley 2010: 141-142). Finally and most recently, in the introduction to their *Neo-Victorian Studies* special issue dealing with visual and material culture in neo-Victorianism, Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss offer the frontispiece of Faye L. Booth’s *Cover the Mirrors* (2007) as an example of the tendency to market neo-Victorian novels as “pleasurable commodity objects inviting consumption” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011: 4). Critics, then, attribute different functions to neo-Victorian book design, ranging from self-reflexive postmodern playfulness, through asserted (simulated) cultural prestige and reader response manipulation, to strategic targeting of the capitalist consumer.

This survey demonstrates that the marketing, cover-art and physical appearance of neo-Victorian texts has not been completely neglected by critics in this fast-developing field. The subject has, nonetheless, thus far seemed secondary to textual analysis and theoretical explorations. Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss, for instance, revealingly label their discussion of the marketing of Booth’s *Cover the Mirrors* as a “brief detour into the cover art of neo-Victorian novels” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011: 10); the bulk of their attention falls instead on larger questions that gather around such issues as visibility and commodity fetishism. In what follows, analysis of the material condition of texts is my sole focus. I turn not to the look of neo-Victorian novels themselves, however, but to popular reprint editions such as the Penguin Victorian Bestsellers Series mentioned at the outset. I contextualise detailed analysis of this 2010 example, designed by Richard Green, in relation both to broad changes in the production and consumption of classic texts and to a number of other series published by Penguin Classics between 2006 and 2010: the Clothbound Classics, Books for Boys and Sherlock Holmes series, all designed by Coralie Bickford-Smith.

The following analysis of the material forms and cover-art of recent classics reprint editions intersects significantly with ongoing discussions in the field. It contributes, in the first instance, to the increasing number of considerations of material and textual cultures. Perhaps most notable amongst such work is the already-mentioned *Neo-Victorian Studies* special issue edited by Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss, but several other articles have

shifted attention from an interest in the haunted and the mysteriously spectral to more material concerns.<sup>2</sup> Beth Palmer, for instance, has convincingly argued that the “self-consciousness regarding a book’s place in print culture”, as evident in the works of neo-Victorian novelists such as Michel Faber and Sarah Waters, “is a legacy of the sensation novels they pastiche” (Palmer 2009: 90). Lea Heiberg Madsen has taken this fascination with materiality even further by considering in detail how *Mrs. Charles Darwin’s Recipe Book: Revived and Illustrated* (2008) “invites us to sense the Victorian past through the elaboration (and ingestion) of the dishes therein” (Heiberg Madsen 2013: 126). The popular reprint series that are my main interest in this essay cannot be said to bring about quite the measure of active “ingestion” of the Victorian past that *Mrs. Charles Darwin’s Recipe Book* does. They do, however, affect the way in which particular fictional products of the Victorian are consumed – and perhaps digested – in more metaphorical terms.

In another sense, my consideration of the marketing, design and reception of these neo-Victorian textual forms further expands our use of neo-Victorianism as a critical term. It is certainly true that early definitions, such as those offered by Heilmann and Llewellyn, are broad in scope, and extend to “literary, filmic, [and] audio/visual” texts (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4). Recent articles and special issues of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, such as Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall’s *Steampunk, Science, and (Neo)Victorian Technologies*, have also paid attention to forms of culture beyond the literary. By pondering more precisely how the appearance of a text’s (re)packaging as much as the words within its covers might be interpreted as neo-Victorian, this essay continues in similarly expansive fashion. In doing so, it aims to bring together aspects of neo-Victorian culture that are usually considered separately.

The book design trends I analyse can be related conceptually to broader social and cultural shifts that can be defined as neo-Victorian. The way in which all of the Penguin Classics series stress the visual, and in some cases tactile, pleasures of the physical book aligns them not only with the Arts and Crafts movement, but perhaps surprisingly also with steampunk. The books are, of course, mass-produced by one of the world’s largest publishing corporations, and so lack the DIY, home-made qualities of some steampunk artefacts. On the other hand, however, both steampunk cultures and neo-Victorian book design respond deeply to the experience of an age in

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which “technological objects have tried to become invisible” (Bowser and Croxall 2010: 16). By adopting old-fashioned technologies at the very time when these are most at risk of being phased out, both steampunk and book artists reassert the primary pleasures of presence.

### 1. Reinventing the Classics

Penguin Books is perhaps most frequently defined by “three coloured stripes and a dancing bird” (Baines 2005: 7). Yet, as Phil Baines has shown recently in *Penguin by Design*, the firm’s “covers are about far more than” this basic template (Baines 2005: 7). As Baines and other scholars and enthusiasts have noted, since the appearance of Penguin paperbacks on the market in 1935, their tendency has been towards substantial innovation in design matters. This willingness to experiment is evident even in one of their more reliably staid ventures: the Penguin Classics. Begun in 1946 under the stewardship of the classicist E. V. Rieu, the Classics have since been through a number of subtle re-stylings.

Since 2006, however, this practice of slowly evolving the look of the Classics series has shifted. With the arrival of the Red Classics in that year Penguin began to market a proliferating number of series that radically depart from the established Classics design. Several of these new series in the Classics range, such as the Clothbound Classics, Books for Boys and Victorian Bestsellers, will be discussed in more detail below. It is worth dwelling briefly first on Penguin’s aims in departing from the basic template that had served them so well for a number of decades. As the then Penguin Classics publisher Adam Freudenheim explains, the

driving initial idea was to get back to the roots of what Penguin Classics had been about. They hadn’t been about academic editions; it was about getting the books to the widest possible audience, wherever that might be. So it’s just a modern twist on that. (Freudenheim qtd. in Hare 2008: 47)

Freudenheim’s statements usefully gesture towards several key features of Penguin’s strategy with the Classics imprints that began with the 2006 Red series. First, classic art contemporary with the text would be replaced by modern book design, in the tradition of Penguin’s general list. By returning to Penguin’s standard smaller format, moreover, these series would

effectively become ‘pocket’ Classics. Finally, the removal of the modern black Penguin Classics’ scholarly apparatus would signal a revival of the populist aims behind the Classics volumes in the 1940s.

As Freudenheim’s comments suggest, Penguin’s starting point was a commercial one. In emphasising the look of the packaging a key aim was to adapt the Classics image for a new audience. It also seems likely that such diversification was an attempt to carve out more market share for Penguin alongside increased competition not only from established ventures, such as the Oxford World’s Classics, but also from firms associated with contemporary fiction like Vintage Books. The audience which the publisher wanted to attract was living in what we might loosely call a neo-Victorian cultural moment, namely, a moment when the threatened ‘end of history’ precipitated a contrary historical turn or renewed backward glance, especially to the nineteenth century as a key point of “cultural emergence” of the (post)modern age (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: xv). Accordingly, the commercial origins of the new Penguin Classics series should also be set in the broader context of a reinvigorated historical consciousness and renewed interest in cultural memory work. At the same time as the Classics volumes were being released, neo-Victorianism was establishing itself as a critical practice. Major studies such as Cora Kaplan’s *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* and Simon Joyce’s *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* appeared in 2007, and this journal itself followed in 2008.<sup>3</sup> In more general terms, readers and consumers of culture were increasingly able to approach the Victorian through the neo-Victorian, for instance by picking up Sarah Waters’s popular neo-Victorian trio of stand-alone novels (published between 1998 and 2002 and all later televised), or watching adaptations of classic fiction on the BBC (*Bleak House* being televised in 2005, and *Cranford* appearing in 2007).<sup>4</sup> Almost inevitably, cultural influences such as these filtered through both to an enthusiastic book-buying public and to Penguin’s (visually) literate design team.

Penguin’s renewed emphasis on striking cover design with these new series can, moreover, be explained not only by the increasing visibility of neo-Victorian culture and competition from rival print editions, but also by something perhaps even more significant: the rise of electronic texts. Since its release in the US in 2007 and in other territories in 2009, for instance, the Amazon Kindle e-reader has (at least according to Amazon’s own figures) brought with it a huge increase in the worldwide sale of e-



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books.<sup>5</sup> Given that in the Classics market most texts are freely downloadable in multiple formats via platforms such as Internet Archive and Project Gutenberg, publishers of new physical editions of these out-of-copyright works must offer something distinctive to entice prospective readers. One obvious way in which they can do so is through innovative book design that transforms an ‘old’ familiar classic text into a newly desirable object. Indeed, as Adam Freudenheim explains astutely, this practice might even result in increased attention to the physical text: “There’s an opportunity here [...]. As books become downloadable, the book, as object, becomes increasingly desirable; and there’s much more of the sense of excitement of a physical book” (Freudenheim qtd. in Hare 2008: 45).

This sense of pleasure in the materiality of the book has a history that precedes Penguin’s innovations. As Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Sara Rosa Espi and Inge van de Ven have noticed, “since the 1990s, authors have [...] gone back to books and paper. They have reinvented the literary as a hybrid genre that hovers between the verbal and the visual, and foregrounds its paper-based ‘analogue’ materiality” (Brillenburg Wurth, Espi and van de Ven 2013: 93). The evidence of the turn “back to books” proposed by these three scholars comes from the work of contemporary literary authors like Mark Z. Danielewski and from the productions of “amateur authors [...] of personal zines and chapbooks” (Brillenburg Wurth, Espi and van de Ven 2013: 93). Their insights can also be applied to the more obviously commercial practices of Penguin’s book production teams and designers. As the critics argue, although the increasing emphasis placed on the materiality of the book may appear to be “a productive contrast to digital writing”, it is also produced by it, and “exists *by virtue of* the digital” (Brillenburg Wurth, Espi and van de Ven 2013: 105; original emphasis). Such a return to the physicality of books is, then, not a straightforwardly nostalgic turning back, but rather a more self-conscious and “ironic” response to digital culture (Brillenburg Wurth, Espi and van de Ven 2013: 106). What follows argues that the design of recent Penguin Classics series also demonstrates a self-consciousness in its approach to the book as a (neo-Victorian) object.

## 2. “Sort of stuck in the past”

Coralie Bickford-Smith is one designer in particular who has brought what Freudenheim terms a notable “sense of excitement” to the world of physical

books. An in-house designer at Penguin since 2002, Bickford-Smith's work has, according to commentary in the design press, "attracted worldwide attention" and "is setting new standards for bookish artwork in the modern era of publishing" (Klanten, Huebner and Losowsky 2013: 18; Oreskovich 2012: n.p.). Her memorable "artwork" in series such as the Clothbound Classics will be analysed in more detail subsequently; what is striking in the first instance about Bickford-Smith's articulation of her own approach is its strongly "bookish" and even academic quality. In a feature on her work in the recent *Fully Booked Ink on Paper: Design and Concepts for New Publications*, she explains her strong belief in the importance of books' materiality in an increasingly virtual age thus:

If it's cheaper and more convenient to read a novel on your phone – and many classics are available free that way – then books have to justify their presence and expense by accentuating the qualities of the physical object. Materials such as foil and cloth are ideal for that because they have a tactile quality that can't be replicated digitally. (Bickford-Smith qtd. in Klanten, Huebner and Losowsky 2013: 18)

As she further explains in a video interview accompanying the print one, her own specific influences are historical: "The tradition of my craft really comes from looking at Victorian book bindings" (Bickford-Smith 2013: n.p.). It is her next suggestive statement in the interview, however, that is most significant for the purposes of my argument here; Bickford-Smith admits, almost casually, "So I've [*sic*] sort of stuck in the past, but then I try and fuse that with modern inspiration" (Bickford-Smith 2013: n.p.). Her point might not seem to amount to much at first listen, but it does frame Bickford-Smith's strategies as specifically neo-Victorian ones. Her work, in other words, marks a return to Victorian-influenced practices, but not without self-consciousness. To return to Heilmann and Llewellyn's already cited definition of neo-Victorianism, it is as much an "*act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" as a safe reread of Victorian methods of book design.

Recent profiles of Bickford-Smith certainly reveal a strong historically-minded archival streak. The piece in *Fully Booked Ink on Paper* mentioned above, for instance, outlines how, "[s]triving to create designs

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that reflect a sense of heritage and cultural identity, she spends much time researching the period in which the book was written, the background of the author, and the look and feel of the era” (Klanten, Huebner and Losowsky 2013: 18). As part of this process “[i]mmersing herself in the book” itself is also very important for Bickford-Smith, since part of her purpose in designing the Classics covers is to do a “good job in communicating the author’s work” (Klanten, Huebner and Losowsky 2013: 18). Other articles on Bickford-Smith’s work show that, perhaps unsurprisingly, she is inspired by the look of historical book design as much as what appears between the covers of her Penguin volumes. In preparing the Books for Boys series, for example, she “spent a lot of time in the London Library printing and typography section [...] putting together research of type from the periods when each book was published” (Horton 2008: n.p.). It would be reductive, however, to suggest that Bickford-Smith’s influences come only from the distant (Victorian) past. In a 2009 interview, for instance, she admitted that her interests are also very contemporary, technologically-mediated ones: “I can happily spend hours mooching around sites like Ffffound!, Ace Jet 170, But Does It Float, and Design\*Sponge [...] as well as checking out amazing objects on eBay” (Bickford-Smith, qtd in Ditmeyer 2009: n.p.). The artists who serve as her inspiration are, moreover, rather eclectic, ranging from William Blake to important twentieth-century Penguin designers such as Romek Marber and Alan Aldridge (Wagstaff 2009: n.p.; Horton 2008: n.p.).

Paying more detailed attention to the series designs completed by Bickford-Smith provides clear evidence of their neo-Victorian qualities. It also underlines the versatility of her bookish approach to the Victorian past. In the four iterations of the Clothbound Classics discussed here as my first case study, for example, she responds to the physical form of the Victorian book itself. This is, in other words, not a collected edition of Victorian texts, even if a number of canonical nineteenth-century novels such as Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861) and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) are inevitably included.<sup>6</sup> Instead her bindings can be read as what the editors of *Fully Booked Ink on Paper* have described as “classic, contemporary celebrations of traditional book design” (Klanten, Huebner and Losowsky 2013: 18). The volumes’ design patterns are foil-stamped into hefty cloth covers. As a result they recall the methods of the decorated cloth bindings that became increasingly common in the middle years of the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the fact that they need to be felt and handled

to be truly appreciated contributes to the nostalgic effect of books that have been aptly described as “celebrations” of traditional practices. As Bickford-Smith herself claims, the very materiality of the Clothbound Classics is particularly significant in the age of the electronic book, since “they have a tactile quality that can’t be replaced digitally” (Bickford-Smith qtd. in Klanten, Huebner and Losowsky 2013:18).

The repeating geometric patterns stamped on all of the covers also visually echo those typically created for the expensive bindings of nineteenth-century books. At the same time, however, other elements of the Clothbound Classics’ design stretch the idea of ‘traditional’ Victorian book bindings. This divergence from straightforward historical recreation is most evident at the level of the image chosen to represent each novel. The series is regularly patterned, but each cover features a different motif. Bickford-Smith’s choice of image is deliberate and in some way symbolic of the novel’s content. Thus, as she has explained,

[t]he peacock feather on *Dorian Gray* [...] plays on the book’s themes of vanity and the superficial, whereas the leaf motif on *Jane Eyre* refers directly to the lightning-blasted chestnut tree, a concrete element in the text that serves as a potent symbol of the book’s central relationship. (Bickford-Smith qtd. in Ditmeyer 2009: n.p.)

On one level, then, Bickford-Smith’s individual designs offer a rereading – sometimes implicitly judgemental – of the novel in question. In the way her bindings self-consciously reflect on what lies between the covers they move towards highly-designed, pictorial twentieth-century paperback covers as much as they reflect the more generic, if often colourful, nineteenth-century blocked and embossed cloth covers.<sup>8</sup>

Bickford-Smith’s combination of self-consciousness and “modern inspiration” (Bickford-Smith 2013: n.p.) with careful historicism is equally evident in the two other series that form my second case study in this section: the Books for Boys and Sherlock Holmes editions published by Penguin in 2008.<sup>9</sup> Her careful research on “period-appropriate type” for the former series at the London Library has already been mentioned (Horton 2008: n.p.). As the editors of *Fully Booked Ink on Paper* have noted, the covers of her Sherlock Holmes collection “use type that evokes the

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Victorian era” too (Klanten, Huebner and Losowsky 2013: 22; see <http://www.penguinclassics.co.uk/books/the-adventures-of-sherlock-holmes/9780141034355/>). It is worth noting, however, that these are paperback books. This makes both collections seem, in a material sense, more modern products than Bickford-Smith’s clothbound hardback series.

Their modernity is also emphasised by other visual elements of the paperback designs. One convincing way of reading the Sherlock Holmes covers, for example, is to notice their striking use of the “compositional techniques of vintage film posters” (Klanten, Huebner and Losowsky 2013: 22). More specifically, Bickford-Smith’s bold framing and use of colour recalls a number of popular genres taken up particularly enthusiastically in the Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s. Thus *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894), republished by Penguin in 2008, present howling wolves and gravestones coloured in lurid yellows and greens to create an eerie Gothic horror effect. In contrast, the covers of *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), republished in 2008 (see <http://www.penguinclassics.co.uk/books/a-study-in-scarlet/9780141034331/>), and *His Last Bow* (1917) and *The Case-book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927), republished as a collected volume in 2008 (see <http://www.amazon.co.uk/His-Last-Case-book-Sherlock-Holmes/dp/0141034343>), employ monochromatic images of gunmen and corpses combined with dramatic splashes of crimson red to generate a noirish crime film mood. Bickford-Smith’s own choices and visual style for these same texts, then, show her fusing (or from the perspective of popular culture, ‘mashing-up’) the traditional and Victorian with the popular and more modern. In another sense, repackaging late Victorian popular fiction by a writer like Arthur Conan Doyle to look like hard-boiled or horror cinema of the early twentieth century is entirely apt, since the popular novels of the Victorian era provided so much raw material for early Hollywood productions.

Technically, of course, not all of Conan Doyle’s Holmes narratives are Victorian. Indeed, the same is true of the Books for Boys series, which includes Victorian adventures such as Henry Rider Haggard’s *She* (1887) and Anthony Hope’s *Rupert of Hentzau* (1898), but which also ranges into early twentieth-century popular fare such as John Buchan’s *The 39 Steps* (1915) and *Greenmantle* (1916). Packaging them in hybrid covers that combine Victorian and twentieth-century visual styles can certainly be read

as evidence of a neo-Victorian approach, but in a more obvious way some of these texts are already transitional works incorporating both late Victorian and early Modernist characteristics.

The works chosen for both series also clearly question another boundary: the defining line between canonical and popular fiction. Penguin's willingness to include fiction by authors such as Conan Doyle and Haggard in a Penguin Classics imprint is influenced by their recent "far more catholic interpretation of what constitutes a 'classic'" (Baines 2005: 234). According to Phil Baines, this shift goes back as far as 1985 when the Penguin English Library was merged with the Classics. In relation to the more specific case of Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (1889), Susan Pickford has claimed that the appearance of the novel in Penguin Classics in 1999 "granted [it] a (minor) place in the canon" (Pickford 2007: 91). Pickford argues convincingly that these changing interpretations about the literary Classic derive from publishers like Penguin "having to follow the publishing strategies of the paperback collections in order not to lose market share" (Pickford 2007: 91). These commercial and cultural factors have certainly shaped the marketing and design of the Penguin Victorian Bestsellers series, which appeared just after Coralie Bickford-Smith's work for series such as the Clothbound Classics, in a number of intriguing ways.

### 3. "Shadowy back streets and secret passages"

The Victorian Bestsellers series, a "collection of ten [...] romantic and sensational novels" with cover designs by Richard Green, was released by Penguin in early 2010 (Kirschbaum 2010: n.p.).<sup>10</sup> The publisher enthusiastically promoted its new "collection" in a piece for the *Penguin Classics Newsletter* published in February of that year. This promotional text, written by their then editorial director Alexis Kirschbaum, provides both an illuminating glimpse into what Penguin were trying to achieve and a useful starting point for more extensive discussion of the series' visual and material features. Kirschbaum's piece emphasises specific features of the collection while also self-consciously embodying the overwrought mood of the types of book included in it. Thus, in explaining the appeal of the individual titles, Kirschbaum keenly informs her reader that

[f]rom the moment each book appeared, it was staggeringly popular, the bestseller of its day. Each one a page-turner –

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heavy on rollicking plot and suspense – they were considered immoral in their period, dealing as they do with criminals, night-time absconding, kidnappings, highwaymen and the raciest men of the cloth you’re ever likely to meet over a Black Mass. Women were warned off reading them by their nervous husbands due to their contagious depravity. (Kirschbaum 2010: n.p.)

The extract therefore stresses three things in particular about the Victorian Bestsellers: that they were exceedingly popular (much like the bestsellers of today); that they are plot-driven, exciting and suspenseful; and, finally, that their subject matter is dangerous and racy. Kirschbaum’s overheated, purple prose also effectively conveys the sensational excitement of these narratives: they are not only popular but “staggeringly” so, and their plots are “rollicking” ones.

With all of this exciting naughtiness it is perhaps unsurprising that, in the next section of the *Newsletter* blurb, Kirschbaum goes on to stress the sheer entertainment provided by the Victorian Bestsellers. She explains, more specifically, how “putting them together in a series we hoped to emphasize the purely pleasurable readability of each one of them”, and mentions again just a few lines later how much she herself “enjoyed them” (Kirschbaum 2010: n.p.). In the same paragraph Kirschbaum outlines another aim of collecting these novels in a series even more significant in the context of this discussion:

These novels attempt to bring together the Gothic and the Romance novel, so there’s lots of gloomy chambers and gloomier galleries of ancient Halls [*sic*], manorial residences, and old English highwaymen, Italian marcheses, castles, brigands and outlaws; many transplant perfectly the exotic trappings of the Gothic into the English domestic scene. (Kirschbaum 2010: n.p.)

The evocative “gloomy chambers” and “manorial residences” mentioned here, however, belong not so much to the Victorian Gothic of Sheridan Le Fanu or Bram Stoker as to classic eighteenth-century Gothic works, such as Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of*

*Udolpho* (1794). Why, then, is the series labelled *Victorian Bestsellers*? Kirschbaum's text justifies the earlier novels' inclusion by implying their popularity stretched into the Victorian period (“[f]rom the moment each book appeared, it was staggeringly popular”).

The tendency towards a flexible (even vague) use of the term Victorian in twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture provides another plausible explanation for the term chosen by the Penguin editorial team. As Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich argue, the Victorian period is so “historically central to late-century postmodern consciousness” that it “projects a ‘Victorian feel’” into distinct historical periods on either side of it (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: xi). The use of the term ‘bestseller’, both in the series title and in Kirschbaum’s blurb, of course, is also a problematic one, at least for sticklers interested in historical accuracy. According to the *OED* it was first used in British English in 1923, and therefore not familiar to Victorians themselves. What these anachronisms stress, then, is that the *Victorian Bestsellers* series reassembles the popular fiction of the period from a hybrid neo-Victorian (rather than carefully historicised) perspective. Indeed the genealogy of popular fiction that it brings into being, in which the “exotic trappings of the Gothic” are “transplant[ed] perfectly [...] into the English domestic scene”, very much derives from late twentieth-century conceptions of the popular canon with its steady progress from “the Gothic romance” of the late eighteenth-century through “the Newgate novel of criminal ‘low life’, and the ‘silver fork’ novel of scandalous and sometimes criminal ‘high life’” before the rise of sensation fiction in the 1860s (Brantlinger 1982: 1).

One final element of the *Penguin Classics Newsletter* piece on the *Bestsellers* series merits further discussion. In promoting this collection of popular novels Kirschbaum significantly refers to the work of a prominent neo-Victorian novelist; she informs the reader that she “enjoyed [the Victorian bestsellers] with the same zest as a contemporary crime novel such as Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith*” (Kirschbaum 2010: n.p.). The article reinforces the connection by concluding with a testimonial by Waters herself, who calls it

[a] wonderful series, bringing together some of the best examples of gothic and sensation fiction, and taking the reader on a thrilling, irresistible journey through the shadowy



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back streets and secret passages of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century life. (Waters qtd. in Kirschbaum 2010: n.p.)

Kirschbaum's text may not explicitly define Waters as a neo-Victorian novelist. Nonetheless, the link she makes between Waters's work and the series, even quoting Waters's remarks on the back of every volume, reinforces the point that we can view them in similar terms. As a number of critics have noted, neo-Victorian writers have been strongly influenced by the sensation tradition. Waters in particular, as Rohan McWilliam points out, has "drawn on many of its themes, particularly its rich delight in complex plots, its foregrounding of female characters and desires, its dark landscapes and underworlds, and its shocks and hysterical emotions" (McWilliam 2009: 109).<sup>11</sup> Using Waters's words as a kind of introduction to the series therefore has an interesting, circular effect: it means that sensational texts from earlier periods are being framed by one of the neo-Victorian authors indebted to them.

The influence of Waters's fiction is also subtly evident in the series' cover designs. Many of the Victorian Bestsellers covers emphasise an object that plays a particularly important role in the narrative. The front of *The String of Pearls* (1847, republished 2010, see <http://www.penguinclassics.co.uk/books/the-string-of-pearls-a-romance-the-original-sweeney-todd/9780141192345/>), for instance, includes a roughly-drawn pearl necklace, while the centre of the cover of *The Moonstone* (1868, republished 2010, see <http://www.waterstones.com/waterstonesweb/products/wilkie+collins/the+moonstone/6923509/>) depicts a glittering diamond in the palm of a hand. In doing so they visually recall the equally bold covers Virago produced for Waters's neo-Victorian works that deployed striking but rather generalised images of significant objects, such as the pink shoes on *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) or the white gloves on the front of *Fingersmith* (2002), to introduce readers to Waters's fictional worlds.

Richard Green's cover designs can also be analysed as neo-Victorian products in a much more general sense. Green, in fact, seems to be working in a rather similar vein to Coralie Bickford-Smith in her Books for Boys and Sherlock Holmes collections, although a book design blog interview from early 2010 demonstrates that the approach he takes to his art is not as self-

consciously literary as that of Bickford-Smith. He admits, for instance, that he had “never read any of these [Victorian Bestsellers] books before [he] worked on them”, and that he is “not a big reader of books”, being “more interested in their design” (Green qtd. in Morrison 2010: n.p.). It is nonetheless possible to see in Green’s work a very similar fusing of period and modern elements that appeals so much to Bickford-Smith. One of his starting points, in fact, was “some old Victorian woodblock type [he] found” (Green qtd. in Morrison 2010: n.p.). The use of such period type gives several of the covers a strongly Victorian feel; the lettering on the front of the edition of *Paul Clifford* (1830), for instance, resembles the solid type found on nineteenth-century playbills. Yet, even though Green carefully employs authentic woodblock type, he nonetheless plays with its positioning and size in several volumes of the series. With the layout of type on the covers of *The String of Pearls* and *The Moonstone*, for instance, he creates a more unstable, fragmented and ultimately modern effect.

Other aspects of Green’s approach with the Victorian Bestsellers covers further extend this self-conscious combination of Victorian and more modern styles. One of the most marked features of the series is the bold, bright blues, reds and greens used in the covers. This certainly distances them from the staid black design of other Penguin Classics. It also aligns them with what seems another key influence on Richard Green’s visuals: the work of the notable Modernist-influenced designer Saul Bass, most famous for his film marketing work for directors such as Otto Preminger and Alfred Hitchcock. Green does not explicitly admit his indebtedness to Bass in the online interview quoted above, but he does say he is “always looking for something new for inspiration, and to broaden [his] design knowledge” (Green qtd. in Morrison 2010: n.p.). It seems unlikely that he would not at least have a passing knowledge of someone so well-known in the design community. The evidence of the covers themselves certainly suggests a strong response to the Bass aesthetic. They resemble, in one sense, an intriguing combination of elements of Victorian theatrical playbills with Bass’s colourful mid-twentieth-century film posters and title sequences.<sup>12</sup> One in particular clearly alludes to a famous Bass image: the design for *The Mysteries of Udolpho* shows a figure falling into a dizzying vortex; it not only innovatively arranges the letters of the title around the effect, but also recalls Bass’s work on the poster and opening sequence of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958).

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Bass himself has claimed that paratextual work such as this was concerned with “setting mood, creating an atmosphere, an attitude and a generalized metaphor for what the film was about” (Bass and Kirkham 2011: 108). Green’s covers achieve this too. Their indebtedness to the idea of the Hitchcockian thriller, moreover, extends beyond the single visual reference to Bass’s work on *Vertigo*. Arguably, other objects, such as the pearls depicted so centrally on the front of *The String of Pearls* and the diamond on the cover of *The Moonstone*, can be interpreted as a version of Hitchcock’s narratological concept of the MacGuffin, described by Todd McGowan as “an object that embodies a wealth of apparently significant content but ultimately is important only insofar as it moves the narrative along” (McGowan 2011: 513). Also in this context, the striking focus on mirrored but subtly different faces on Green’s covers for *Paul Clifford* and *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) references not only the strong concern of both novels with individual identity; it also fascinatingly refigures them in relation to the Hitchcockian fixation on double, confused or lost identities. Taking all of this visual detail together, then, we can see that the title Victorian Bestsellers is more apt than it might have seemed at first, since Green takes Victorian elements and reinvents them via the visual language of the twentieth-century Hitchcockian bestselling thriller, a process akin to the practice of neo-Victorian writers.

Paratextual features beyond cover design also reinforce this connection between the Victorian Bestsellers series and popular culture more generally. Indeed the epithet “Bestseller” is pertinent here since, unlike other black-covered volumes published by Penguin Classics, this particular collection’s packaging does not attempt to disguise the commerciality of these books. Each volume, for instance, displays a primitive-looking, round stamp with the words “Victorian Bestseller” that underlines their mass-produced – and mass appeal – quality. More generally, they are promoted much more like mass-market paperbacks than works in a Classics series. Most obviously, many of them include press quotes as part of their cover blurbs. Their tendency is to praise the entertainment value of the novel at hand above its literary quality; examples include “Gripping stuff *THE TIMES*” and “Gruesomely thrilling *INDEPENDENT*”.<sup>13</sup> These are certainly not critical comments from when the novel was first published; thus their effect is again to align the Bestsellers with modern rather than period culture. On the inside front and

inside back covers, moreover, the other volumes in the series are promoted with thumbnail images of their covers and another marketing blurb. Such a strategy positions them as collectible as much for the look of the book as for the writing between their covers. Each volume, finally, makes its seriality explicit by including a number at the base of its spine, and providing a (non-chronological) list of all of the Victorian Bestsellers titles on its back cover.

The strongly neo-Victorian qualities of recently published series such as the Penguin Victorian Bestsellers can be brought into sharp relief by comparing them briefly with a popular reprint series that appeared just over a century before. The Half-Forgotten Books collection, published by George Routledge and produced under the general editorship of the critic E. A. Baker, reprinted neglected works of literature from the previous two hundred years or so in affordable but handsome volumes.<sup>14</sup> Like the Victorian Bestsellers it also includes Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, but ranges more widely into the annals of forgotten Victorian popular fiction to include novels by, amongst others, George Alfred Lawrence, George Herbert Rodwell and Edmund Yates. What is most pertinent about the Half-Forgotten Books in this context, however, is the way in which the neglected texts are presented. Each volume sports the same rather unexciting cover illustration of a collection of solid-looking books; all that differentiates them is the author and title. All texts also include an introduction. These generally provide some basic biographical data, and note that the author, while not truly great or important, deserves at least to be read.<sup>15</sup> The overall effect of these paratextual materials is, then, rather quiet and understated, with the seeming aim of modest reclamation of (non-canonical) examples of Victorian popular fiction.

The presentation of the Victorian Bestsellers is, as already seen, very much shaped by different sorts of cultural preoccupations. Appearing, as they have, at a time when popular genres such as the sensation novel are “no longer seen as irremediably irrelevant or marginal in Victorian fiction but as representing a ‘new’ side to the mid-Victorian imaginary” (Maunder 2005: 3), the series is able to move beyond recuperation to adopt a more celebratory approach. To borrow Sarah Waters's earlier cited words, the novels in the popular reprint series, which has been my final subject, provide “a thrilling, irresistible journey through the shadowy back streets and secret passages” of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the exuberant remapping of the canon presented by Waters here has been shaped not only

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through the efforts of Victorianist literary critics, but also by the cultural work performed by neo-Victorian novelists in responding to and rewriting the era's popular sensational genres.

In more abstract terms, the reprint series analysed in this essay are obviously neo-Victorian in the way that their engagement with the Victorian bookish past always constitutes a qualified and self-conscious process. As much as series like Coralie Bickford-Smith's *Clothbound Classics* might seem to mimic the practices of Victorian bookbinding, they do so with one eye on "modern inspiration". Their response to historical objects is, as a result, not straightforwardly nostalgic. In this fashion, Penguin's neo-Victorian book design is much like movements such as steampunk culture and the attempt by authors and publishers to 'go back to the book', as surveyed at the start. All are products of the technological and cultural shifts that have brought about a world in which information is frequently mediated – and virtualised – through screens rather than rendered tactilely accessible via the printed page. In turn, the Penguin Classics series produce a new frame for Victorian fiction. To put it another way: not only do these examples of neo-Victorian design recall the physical book of the Victorian age, but they also provide "a different way into the Victorians", functioning as "a mediator into the experience of reading the 'real' thing" (Llewellyn 2008: 168). Indeed, given their visual impact and proximity to the Victorian text itself, paratextual features such as cover illustration and advertising blurbs may even have a much more immediate effect in remediating our understanding of Victorian works than examples of neo-Victorian writing. The way we package Victorian fiction now, in other words, affects both how it – and how 'the Victorian' per se – will be read in the future.

### **Notes**

1. Another publisher's series, the *Vintage Classics*, was launched in 2007 with the "ambition" of bringing "the best writers of yesterday, today and tomorrow to as wide a readership as possible" (<http://www.vintage-books.co.uk/about-us/>). The cover designs of Victorian novels in this series, such as *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *Great Expectations* (1861), are strikingly modern in appearance. The *Great Expectations* cover image, for instance, is an impressionistic shot of broken leg-irons on a muddy marsh-like landscape. In

contrast, Penguin’s approach to Classics cover design is more plural and self-conscious, and includes neo-Victorian elements alongside more straightforward modernisation.

2. For further discussion of neo-Victorian spectrality see, for instance, Arias and Pulham 2010 and Kontou 2009.
3. For a more detailed narrative of the origins of neo-Victorianism as a discipline, see Stetz 2012.
4. Perhaps not incidentally, the screen play for *Bleak House* was written by Andrew Davies, who in 2002 had also adapted Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) for the BBC.
5. As a 2012 *Guardian* piece explains, “[a]mazon.co.uk has said that sales of its Kindle ebooks are now outstripping its sales of printed books” (Malik 2012: n.p.). More recently in the same publication, Alison Flood has noted in more measured terms that “print book sales fell by almost £74m last year, reaching a nine-year low – although the decline slowed compared to 2011” (Flood 2013: n.p.).
6. Full series listings, as well as images of each cover, are available on Bickford-Smith’s website (<http://cb-smith.com/>).
7. Mass-produced decorated cloth bindings appeared from the 1830s. For further discussion of Victorian cloth trade bindings, see King 2003 and McLean 1974.
8. Bickford-Smith’s use of symbolic motifs on the Clothbound Classics covers intriguingly resembles a neo-Victorian fictional example. In *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007) the titular character explains her approach to book binding thus: “It was always my endeavour – my point of ‘modernity’ [...] – to distil the essence of the book in the cover design” (Starling 2007: 159). In 2012, Bickford-Smith also used similarly symbolic patterns in her redesign of the Penguin English Library.
9. Again, high-quality images of Bickford-Smith’s designs for both series are available at <http://cb-smith.com/>.
10. Images of eight of the Penguin Victorian Bestsellers covers can be found at <http://causticcovercritic.blogspot.com/2010/02/flexibility-in-design-interview-with.html>.
11. Other critics have noted the connections between sensation and neo-Victorian fiction. Grace Moore, for instance, observes that “what we now term neo-Victorian fiction has been in almost constant dialog with the sensation genre since its inception” (Moore 2011: 627). And Kelly Marsh has argued for the “neo-sensation novel” as a subgenre of historical fiction about the nineteenth century, suggesting sensation as an attractive “mode for contemporary

novelists” since “from the beginning” it “questioned the dominant Victorian culture” (Marsh 1995: 108). So too, of course, does much neo-Victorian writing, most obviously so when adopting marginalised viewpoints or deconstructing moral certainties of the period.

12. As Jennifer Bass explains in the recent critical biography on her father, “Saul was fearless with color. If one looks at the body of work as a whole, a wide range of palettes is evident. Sometimes color is dense and bold, at other times light or lightly washed over another” (Bass and Kirkham 2011: xv). In one sense, Saul Bass’s approach might even be compared to the Victorians’ fascination with vivid colour schemes and aniline dyes.
13. The first press quote is taken from the 2010 Penguin Victorian Bestsellers edition of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), the second from the 2010 edition of *The String of Pearls* (1847).
14. According to the British Library Catalogue, eighteen volumes of the series were produced between 1903 and 1906; advertisements I have consulted in the individual volumes give as many as twenty-five titles.
15. The introduction to *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, for instance, remarks that “[Ann Radcliffe’s] name is often referred to in a vague uncertain way, and this is a sufficient reason why the public should be afforded an opportunity of reading her most frequently quoted book” (Rose 1903: iii).

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