

male aristocrats who collide with formidable aunts, whip-smart servants, and assertive New Women – but that Wodehouse presents a world that is always cheerful and ordered. Gide and Proust, however, consistently engage with nihilism. The exact nature of the relationship between Wilde and Gide is disputed, though Cavendish-Jones sees Gide's nihilism as a product of that relationship, which appears to have had a dynamic similar to the relationship between Wotton and Gray. Finally, Cavendish-Jones offers Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927) as a counterpart to *Dorian Gray*: Wilde's novel is about the dangers of putting life before art; Proust's is 'about the redemptive consequences of putting art before life' (205).

As with other grand unified theories of Wilde (whether based on nationality, sexuality, or radical politics), Cavendish-Jones's fits some works better than others. Even if interpretations occasionally seem strained, however, Cavendish-Jones admits evidence both for and against seeing Wilde as a nihilist. His iconoclastic treatment of Wilde is also refreshing. But a focus on the work to the exclusion of the life means that the book lacks an aetiology of Wilde's nihilism, which surely did not emerge *ex nihilo*. Neither is there any examination of Wilde's ambivalent ideas about anarchy. Although Wilde repudiated rules in an anarchic spirit, his poetry (unexamined here) and *Vera* suggest that he regarded Russian Nihilists as heirs to the Montagnards of France. Still, *Oscar Wilde and Nihilism* is a stimulating, often perceptive contribution, and a comprehensive examination of a previously understudied facet of Wilde's thought.

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Joyce L. Huff and Martha Stoddard Holmes (eds), *A Cultural History of Disability in the Long Nineteenth Century* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), xvi + 214 pp., \$ 32.35, ISBN 9781350436725

A Cultural History of Disability in the Long Nineteenth Century, edited by Joyce Huff and Martha Stoddard Holmes, fills a critical gap in Cultural Disability Studies. Forming part of the Bloomsbury series, *A Cultural History of Disability*, the present fifth volume aligns with the overarching intentions of general editors David Bolt and Robert McRuer, contributing to a project marked by a strong intersectional emphasis on cultural framings of disability. This cultural history of disability, 'attuned to how disabled people have been caught up in systems of representation that

have contained, disciplined, marginalized or normalized them', ranges from literary and autobiographical writings of the period to discussions of the etymology of disability-related terminology, educational practices, medical treatments, and legal advancements (xiii). Attending to the many faces disability has taken, this edited collection, like the series as a whole, maintains a clear 'focus [on] how disability has been portrayed in various aspects of culture and what these representations reveal about lingering and changing social attitudes and understandings' (xiii).

Opening their introduction with a reading of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as one of many examples of the long nineteenth century's relentless endeavour to embrace disability, Huff and Stoddard Holmes note the multiple socio-historical challenges posed by the century's concepts of mental, sensory, and bodily difference. Across the eight chapters, it becomes evident how the construction of disability in this period evolved significantly as a result of social and scientific discourses, to the extent that 'it is misleading even to imagine nineteenth-century disability as a discrete category with firm boundaries' (2). This perspective informs all following sections, favouring broad and inclusive discussions of the multiple forms that nineteenth-century disability assumed.

In this spirit, Nadja Durbach's chapter, 'Atypical Bodies', revisits popular understandings of the 'freak show' phenomenon, situating it within professional debates and medicalised tendencies towards and against freak performers. By historicising the notion of the 'abnormal', Durbach reminds us of the misconceptions historically attributed to freaks, who rarely were disabled individuals in the sense that we conceptualise the term today. Instead, it would be 'more historically accurate to locate them in relation to a range of attitudes and anxieties towards the body' (24). By highlighting the disparity between the 'normality' of the audience and the 'abnormal' corporeality of performers, freak shows thus occasioned debates around the precariousness of bodies, gender, race, sexuality, colonialism, and civilization.

In the second chapter, 'Mobility Impairment', Karen Bourrier offers a detailed overview of the period's mobility aids and assistive technologies, including the increasing demand for prosthetics, the use of canes as fashion accessories, and the development of the wheelchair in its present form. Linking her chapter to Frawley's, Bourrier discusses the two opposing societal conceptions of disability, namely work-related disabilities, perceived as collective concerns, and congenital disabilities, framed as sources of individual suffering.

Maria Frawley's chapter examines chronic pain and illnesses through the autobiographical accounts of Harriet Martineau, Edward

Bulwer-Lytton, and Robert Louis Stevenson, and argues that a cultural history of disability would be incomplete without the inclusion of these experiences.

Shifting the focus towards sensory disabilities, Vanessa Warne and Esme Cleall's chapters centre on blindness and deafness respectively. As with chronic pain, whose broader cultural apprehension was mitigated by print culture and narratives of affliction, perceptions of blindness were also moulded by the introduction of raised-print books made possible by Louis Braille's invention. The inclusion of the first generation of blind readers into the literary economy generated a positive response from the reading public, who regarded this development as a sign of amelioration of blind people's lives. In elucidating popular educational treatments and medical cures, both Warne and Cleall discuss the widely held Victorian perceptions of sensory disabilities as tragic states deserving of pity, an attitude driven by religious beliefs of the time.

In the sixth chapter, Daniel Martin considers speech impediments and dysfluencies, disabilities that have been largely neglected, but that, as with other conditions, were understood through Darwinian notions of evolution. A focus on, and critique of, medicalisation connects this chapter to the next, where Patrick McDonagh expands on the notion of learning difficulties and the nineteenth-century transformation of so-called 'idiocy' from earlier concepts of 'folly' and 'deficient' to the legally codified 'mentally defective' as articulated in the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913. Devoting a significant part of their discussion to literary analyses, McDonagh considers the gendered association of 'idiocy' as a threat to idealised notions of femininity, a recurring anxiety within fictional representations of female madness.

The final chapter, Elizabeth J. Donaldson's 'Mental Health Issues', centres on the development of psychiatry as a discipline in the long nineteenth century, a period often known as the 'Age of Asylums' due to the dramatic increase of patients (interchangeably referred to as 'mad' or 'lunatics'), in newly constructed, state-supported institutions aimed at restoring self-control and reason. Donaldson's contribution likewise explores the stigmatising gendered dimension that disability took on throughout the Victorian period, highlighting how women were particularly subjected to institutional surveillance and policing. By considering the character of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Donaldson further demonstrates how literary representations of disability could play a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions, while also practically influencing medical discourse. Donaldson notes that Victorian psychiatrists relied on Brontë's description of Bertha's

condition to both diagnose ‘insane’ women and legitimise the need for custodial treatment.

As a much-needed addition to the evolving field of Critical Disability Studies scholarship, *A Cultural History of Disability in the Long Nineteenth Century* greatly contributes to our understanding of bodily, sensory, and intellectual difference at the intersection of diverse cultural paradigms. Offering a comprehensive account of lived, fictional, and often medicalised disability, this volume, with its wide-ranging perspective, is a vital resource for established scholars and early-career researchers, along with students newly engaging with the field.

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Shannon Draucker, *Sounding Bodies: Acoustical Science and Musical Erotics in Victorian Literature* (State University of New York Press, 2024), 294 pp., \$34.95, ISBN 9781438498409

In the age of streaming, the consumption of music feels increasingly dematerialised. However, Shannon Draucker’s *Sounding Bodies* reminds us what the Victorians knew and what remains true today: that acts of listening to or creating music are intensely corporeal, and this has important implications for both aesthetics and relationality. By applying erudite research on European acoustical science to nineteenth-century literature, the book reanimates debates about music’s relationship to the body and its liberatory potentials. In particular, Draucker draws on Audre Lorde’s influentially capacious understanding of the erotic to reveal that many Victorian authors used depictions of music to expand possibilities around gender expression, sexuality, and intimacy writ large. Crucially, though, this argument is not a metaphorical one – music as indirect symbol or euphemism for erotic connection – but an overtly physical one in which music is a tool for authors to describe embodied desires and pleasurable sensations. This leads to one of the book’s most salient insights: that ‘physiological science is not always antagonistic to radical ideas about gender [and sexuality] but can in fact be crucial for their articulation’ (53). Despite the subversive potential of many of the representations Draucker adroitly analyses, the project does not shy away from her archive’s limitations through its discussion of the racist and classist underpinnings of Victorian discourses of music and sound – problems still inherent to the classical music world today, as the book’s Coda discusses.