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Spring 2021

## Review of *Victorian Bestseller: The Life of Dinah Craik*

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### Recommended Citation

Farr, Jason S., "Review of *Victorian Bestseller: The Life of Dinah Craik*" (2021). *English Faculty Research and Publications*. 587.

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**Victorian Bestseller: The Life of Dinah Craik**, by Karen Bourrier; pp. xvii + 328. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019, \$85.00, \$69.95 ebook.

Since Elaine Showalter and Sally Mitchell's recovery efforts almost forty years ago, feminist scholars have mined Dinah Craik's biography and writing for the many insights they offer into Victorian codes of gender, disability, and kinship. Critics have likewise turned to Craik for material histories of the book, the domestic novel form, travel writing, translation work, children's literature, and family magazines. Recently, Karen Bourrier has been at the forefront of these studies and is therefore particularly well positioned to write the first biography of Craik. With *Victorian Bestseller: The Life of Dinah Craik*, Bourrier illuminates four decades of Craik's diaries, along with 1,000 unpublished letters, weaving them together with astute literary analysis and historical context to craft an elegant narrative about a successful Victorian woman's authorial career, one that is "now all but forgotten" (vii). The result is a learned, tremendously researched, and lucid literary biography that is accessible to a range of audiences.

Bourrier deftly guides the reader through the various phases of Craik's life and career, with chapters organized as follows: three opening chapters dedicated to her parents and childhood; a chapter on Craik's four early novels; one on the biographical and historical contexts of her most famous work, *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856); and later chapters that examine her shift from novel writing to periodical work, along with her marriage, nontraditional motherhood, translation work, and later years. The book concludes with a satisfying epilogue that briefly touches on the lives of Craik's widower husband and adopted daughter as well as the copious afterlives of her writing. The book's organization follows a logical trajectory and facilitates a thorough examination of Craik's life, from her business acumen and massive contributions to women's writing to the many ways in which her life was marked by disability (most notably, in the men around her).

One of *Victorian Bestseller's* strengths is the light it sheds on Victorian women's sociability. Bourrier shows how Craik established her writing career at a young age and, subsequently, how she helped girls and young women throughout her life. As a new arrival to London, teenaged and "chaperoned by her father," Craik became "a regular attendee at Mrs. S. C. Hall's soirees," where she had the "chance to meet the artistic and literary lions of the day" (32). Such gatherings allowed Craik to publish in periodicals from 1844

to 1848. Craik thus “became part of a sociable nexus that fostered the careers of young woman writers” (60). The immense consequence of these women-led parties, as Bourrier explains, reveals how networking worked for women writers’ careers, affording them “the kinds of opportunities that clubs and dinners offered men” (32).

As she became involved later in life in editing and writing for family magazines, Craik developed relationships with publishers that proved lucrative and personally rewarding, and her writing began to appear in family magazines in the United States. Though her fiction often details a heroic, individual striving that resonated with American readers, Craik benefitted from a web of connections and extended similar kindnesses to authors around her. In one of the book’s most vivid chapters, “Motherhood, 1870 to 1879,” Bourrier examines Craik’s nontraditional approach to maternity. She adopted a baby, Dorothy, who was abandoned, and served as substitute mother to other girls and young women. Once established in her home, Corner House, just outside of London in Bromley, she would regularly host parties. As Bourrier explains, “Dinah’s mentorship of young women was part of a larger pattern in women writers’ lives” (192).

*Victorian Bestseller* has as much to relate about disability as it does the material and social conditions of women writers’ experiences. That Craik’s life was shaped by the mental and physical disabilities of loved ones helps to explain her rich, complex portrayal of embodiment in novels like *Olive* (1850). As Bourrier notes, “Tracing the contours of Craik’s life allows us to see Craik as an embodied subject whose experiences of gender, health, and illness offered both challenges and opportunities for life writing” (x). It is here where *Victorian Bestseller* is perhaps most compelling, at least to this disabled reader: Bourrier’s astute synthesis of biography and history with narrative analysis allows for a profoundly illuminating portrait of the material, literary, and medical contours of disability in Victorian Britain. Bourrier’s account shows that literary biography is a genre in which representation and lived experience can work together to offer a vivid portrait of disability history. This is one of the book’s most noteworthy achievements.

Bourrier narrates the twists and turns of the life of Craik’s dissenting father, Thomas Mulock, who was committed to asylums and sentenced to prison at various points in his life, including when Craik was a child in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Bourrier relies on her expertise in Victorian disability studies to teach readers about asylums, contesting the common assumption that institutionalization was a long-term affair: “But the series of short-term committals (as well as one of longer term) that Thomas Mulock experienced was a more typical pattern.” She goes on to relate that the majority of asylum stays “were short-term committals initiated by family members desperate for a respite from the burden of disturbed relatives” (12). One shudders to think about what asylum enclosure meant for neurodivergent and intellectually disabled people (among others) who were considered “burden[s],” and perhaps Bourrier could have said more about what temporary stays in the asylum entailed. All the same, in Mulock’s case, he suffered (in his own words) “deep dejection” that supposedly resulted in his wife’s “disobedience” (12) but also in being subjected, as an Irishman, “to prejudiced law that favored his English wife” (13). Mulock spent eight of Craik’s formative years in the asylum as a “pauper lunatic.” Still, Craik had an “idyllic childhood” in Newcastle-under-Lyme (13). She enjoyed being outdoors and reading authors like Walter Scott, Amelia Opie, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens.

One of Craik's younger brothers, Ben Mulock, and her husband, George Craik, were also disabled. Like his father, Ben lived with depression, while George lost a leg in a railway accident, an event which brought George and Dinah together, leading to their marriage. Bourrier avoids the ableist tropes that would otherwise limit storytelling about such intimacies, serving as a reminder of why disability studies should be part of any historian or literary scholar's training. Authors have much to learn from Bourrier's sensitive and informed handling of disabled lived experience.

Its distinctive contribution to disability history is just one of this book's many strengths. From its rich details about Craik's embodied experience as a woman writer to the detailed portrait it paints of literary life and sociability in Victorian Britain, *Victorian Bestseller* offers much to different audiences, and it does so in an elegant, accessible style that we can all appreciate.

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