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Good Form: The Ethical Experience of the Victorian Novel by
Jesse Rosenthal (review)

Katherine Voyles

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Good Form: The Ethical Experience of the Victorian Novel

by Jesse Rosenthal; pp. 272. Princeton:

Princeton UP, 2017. \$56.95 cloth.

JESSE ROSENTHAL'S *Good Form: The Ethical Experience of the Victorian Novel* all but guarantees that from now on, scholars of Victorian literature will be talking and writing about form in relation to ethics and ethics in relationship to form. Rosenthal enlivens our sense of the possibilities and powers of narrative by arguing that the temporal unfolding of a novel is a moral, philosophical, and ethical matter. The arc of a story bends as it carries characters from undesirable states of being to ones that, in a phrase that resonates throughout Rosenthal's writing, "feels right" (1). The unfurling of a character's fate links the world of fiction to the reader's own internal state. *Mary Barton* (1848) is an early example in *Good Form* that Rosenthal uses to show "the pull of narrative: its compulsion to change" (23). Rosenthal reorients Raymond Williams's well-known argument that Gaskell lost her nerve as *Mary Barton*'s romance plot supplanted its political plot. In *Good Form*, Gaskell's novel is about an "internally founded ethics" (24). As Rosenthal argues, "Gaskell does seem to be committed to contrasting Mary's private and deeply felt drive—one that does not even need much in the way of an object—with the story of false understandings of others that doom her father" (27).

Rosenthal's account of Victorian form throws light onto fiction's traffic between a narrative that "feels right" to the reader and the world of narrative itself. Sympathy, he is clear, is not what *Good Form* is about; nor is this a book about sentiment. In moving to the internal, the diachronic pull through a story instead of synchronic description, Rosenthal emphasizes how "formal procedures are used to produce a readerly affect which, even though it is literally a response to tropes, is understood in ethical terms" (31). Much of *Good Form* is devoted to chapters about how winding down a narrative is coterminous with characters taking their place in society. A reader's right feeling, the right ending for a character, and the end of narrative come together. In the chapter on *Daniel Deronda* (1876), "The Large Novel and the Law of Large Numbers: *Daniel Deronda* and the Counterintuitive," Rosenthal charts Gwendolyn's isolation, and the monotony of that isolation, to underscore how Eliot's novel defers, instead of aligning with, a reader's right feeling and the right outcome of a character. The *Deronda* chapter is pivotal because tracking this deferral process recasts the alignment that came before: there is a gap between a world made of words and the world of the reader. The process of measuring this gap, and measuring how closely it is narrowed, becomes part of the narrative and ethical work, not just of the book's overall argument but also of how it inhabits and plays out its own argument.

A special virtue of *Good Form* is Rosenthal's contribution to current thought influenced by scholars affiliated with the V21 collective. The book is infused

with thinking about Victorian narrative in the present moment and with the ways in which our moment is constructed by Victorian narrative. “Start” is the final word of *Good Form*, and Rosenthal’s is a book about pulling readers through fiction that tends to its “Afterward” with a beginning (191). Rosenthal’s finale makes a presentist commitment, never buried earlier in the book, especially explicit. “To the extent that nineteenth-century realism becomes a key site for formal narrative analysis,” Rosenthal claims, “it does so because it most fits the model of a story that makes sense, that works according to a narrative grammar that we understand” (193). There is a crucial looping quality to Rosenthal’s argument; our ideas about form are shaped by narrative theory, a theory that is shaped by its understandings of the nineteenth-century novel, and that same realism shapes the theories that elucidate its form. The looping quality to time throughout the book reinforces Rosenthal’s claims about how realist novels unfold their narratives from beginning to end. As Brooks observes, detective fiction famously loops narrative through plot as the retreading of the criminal’s steps—a process that defines a detective’s work—brings the order of events as told in the story in line with the order of events as they unspool in time.¹ Readers of *Good Form* experience something similar; understanding how narratives create trajectories that “feel right” is mediated not only by fiction itself but by our theories of narrative, which are informed by fiction. So it is that a novel’s ending is but a place to start.

Notes

- 1 Peter Brooks’s *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* is the touchstone for Rosenthal’s argument about narrative patterns and time frames in Victorian detective fiction.

Works Cited

Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Vintage Books, 1985.

KATHERINE VOYLES
University of Washington, Bothell



Finding Franklin: The Untold Story of a 165-Year Search

by Russell A. Potter; pp. 280. Montreal:
McGill-Queen’s UP, 2016. \$39.95 cloth.

THIS BOOK looks at the series of obsessive efforts to solve the most famous mystery of polar exploration—the disappearance of the Franklin expedition. Led by Sir John Franklin, this British Admiralty expedition departed