The Madwoman and the Blindman

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“Literary academics who have been meaning to investigate disability studies but have not done so will discover, with pleasure, an approach that can open up well-known texts to fresh readings. Not only that: they will also experience some consciousness-raising. The Madwoman and the Blindman is a welcome addition both to Brontë scholarship and to disability studies.”

—Beth Newman, associate professor of English and Director of Women’s and Gender Studies, Southern Methodist University

“The Madwoman and the Blindman engages, interrogates, and carries out disability studies scholarship and critical approaches to a singular and major literary text, Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre. To my knowledge, it is the only volume of its kind and it will be a much-discussed contribution to disability studies.”

—Brenda Jo Brueggemann, professor of English, The Ohio State University

This breakthrough volume of critical essays on Jane Eyre from a disability perspective provides fresh insight into Charlotte Brontë’s classic novel from a vantage point that is of growing academic and cultural importance. Contributors include many of the preeminent disability scholars publishing today, including a foreword by Lennard J. Davis.

Though an indisputable classic and a landmark text for critical voices from feminism to Marxism to postcolonialism, until now, Jane Eyre has never yet been fully explored from a disability perspective. Customarily, impairment in the novel has been read unproblematically as loss, an undesired deviance from a condition of regularity vital to stable closure of the marriage plot. In fact, the most visible aspects of disability in the novel have traditionally been understood in rather rudimentary symbolic terms—the blindness of Rochester and the “madness” of Bertha apparently standing in for other aspects of identity. The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability resists this traditional reading of disability in the novel. Informed by a variety of perspectives—cultural studies, linguistics, and gender and film studies—the essays in this collection suggest surprising new interpretations, parsing the trope of the Blindman, investigating the embodiment of mental illness, and proposing an autistic identity for Jane Eyre. As the first volume of criticism dedicated to analyzing and theorizing the role of disability in a single literary text, The Madwoman and the Blindman is a model for how disability studies can open new conversation and critical thought within the literary canon.

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