

Navigating the Waters of Nineteenth Century Girlhood through a Constellation of Great Men: Stratford's The Wollstonecraft Detective Agency and "Neo-Victorian" Fiction

The opening book of Jordan Stratford's *The Wollstonecraft Detective Agency* series features in its climax a fiery balloon crash into the Thames, while the second book offers early on a deluge of rain with a mysterious figure: neither use of water is accidental and both symbolize the fluidity the series relies upon. Set in 1826, a year acknowledged as "practically a character in this series," the books nevertheless play freely with history and "the waters of time," rendering both time and history as fluid as water itself. The series' child protagonists – fictionalized Ada Byron and Mary Wollstonecraft – are imagined as friends close in age (three years apart rather than the eighteen they really were) who are joined by their sisters Allegra (who actually died young) and Jane (who, though Mary's actual stepsister was really Allegra's mother) in establishing a detective agency with nods to Arthur Conan Doyle's later Sherlock Holmes stories and – as the texts' titles, *The Case of the Missing Moonstone* and *The Case of the Girl in Grey*, emphasize – with overt homage to Wilkie Collins. Indeed, though Stratford explicitly voices a desire to reclaim his historical but fictionalized girls and their "brilliant" history "for every brave and clever and curious" girl who helped him to create them, his texts thus far (another volume, appearing this spring, features Victoria as princess) are notably bounded by male luminaries. In addition to Collins and Doyle/Holmes, the texts understandably reference Charles Babbage but also offer as recurring characters Percy Shelley ("Peebs") and Charles Dickens (whose works are also acknowledged). In exploring this fascinating new series and its intentional fluidity, then, this paper argues that, like many re-visitations of the long nineteenth century in fiction (sometimes termed "Neo-Victorian," though that term may not be encompassing enough), Stratford's series provides intriguing reconsiderations but still cannot quite (re-)envision the nineteenth century without reference to male luminaries who, in this case, almost literally become masculine landmarks by which the girls chart their way.