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Stephanie Insley Hershinow, *Born Yesterday: Inexperience and the Early Realist Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 192 pp. ISBN 978-1-4214-3883-2; $32.00 (hb).

Stephanie Insley Hershinow's *Born Yesterday: Inexperience and the Early Realist Novel* is a delightfully rewarding experience for its readers. 'Reward' though may be too teleological a term for a book more focused on beginnings instead of winding downs, on experiences instead of endings. Hershinow's innovation is not so much in the texts about which she chooses to write: they are so familiar that she does not even spend much time quoting directly from them (detours into *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schimdt* and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy notwithstanding). *Born Yesterday*'s freshness is born of how it prompts its readers to re-experience the individual novels under consideration, the potentials and possibilities of realism itself, and the contours of narrative and narrative theory. By centring characters in novels who do not know the world at the centre of her account, Hershinow makes realism a surprisingly idealistic form. In Hershinow's telling, inexperienced characters point to ways that early realism imagines what the world should and could be. They achieve this by telling their stories in their own worlds instead of primarily showing our world as it really is.

In chapters on Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), Ann Radcliffe's Gothic novels of the 1790s, Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1776) and *Camilla* (1796) and Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816), Hershinow charts the power of characters who do not know the ways of the world to bend it to their desires—even as the author herself remains ever attentive to the very real perils and pitfalls of doing so. *Born Yesterday*, then, does not precisely enact or embody its own argument—Hershinow is too experienced and elegant a writer for that—but it does in some ways *reproduce* it. The book persuades its readers to not know what we think we already know about the early stages of realism. What it is like to see early realism on its own terms and what it is like to see it not as it is but as it might be (which, it turns out, *is* as it is), is the delight and challenge of the book.

A book about inexperience is, of course, also a book about sex. Sometimes this is so obvious a fact that it need not be stated directly, and sometimes it's worth saying the obvious thing. Hershinow does both brilliantly. The act of sex in these novels is a narrative event that occurs in the context of other narrative events; a reality that makes it precisely like every other event in a novel, even as it is more significant than a great many of them. Hershinow, in other words, is

so attuned to her source material that she channels this dynamic: placing equal importance on sex and other narrative events without underscoring the gravity of sexuality as a key aspect of the characters' lives.

Hershinow's reading of *Clarissa* focuses on the lack of development of the title character. Given that Richardson has long been cast as a pivotal figure in the evolution of the novel, an argument about Clarissa's lack of character development is a scholarly consideration worth noting. Hershinow writes: 'Clarissa's inexperience is heralded as enacting a higher truth than do the lives of her peers. Observing this, we can appreciate the novel's endorsement of the foundational claim of realist fiction at this moment: its limning a world instructive by virtue of its superiority, and not its fidelity, to the real world' (p. 35). In the move from Richardson to Fielding, Hershinow does not transfer her attention towards plot and away from character, as might be conventional. Rather, she insists the unfolding of *Tom Jones*'s story is a push and pull between Tom's constancy of character and all the different ways that character can be viewed, and is viewed, by others. Sophia Western's acceptance of Tom, in Hershinow's compelling reading, is a double-act of sorts: acting as though she herself is inexperienced and did not know about Tom's own sexual experiences, even as she chooses his constancy.

Hershinow's reading of the relationship between the gothic and realism brings more clearly into focus a line of her argumentation: 'the supernatural elements introduced by the Gothic, rather than revealing the Gothic to be unnovelistic, further highlight a skepticism toward empirical observation that, as this book argues, is central to the early novel's project more generally' (p. 85). For Hershinow, gothic heroines (especially Radcliffe's) do not grow into maturity through narratives that explain the strange events they experience; rather, their stories uphold the essential truth of that initial experience. The recurrent self-sameness of the gothic heroine is for Hershinow a formula for the gothic reader herself: a figure whose essential constancy persists even in the face of her need to know what happened. In Hershinow's hands, Frances Burney's story about herself as a young woman novelist and her novels of young inexperienced women is one of deep ambivalence about the act of erasing experience and how to understand it. Hershinow attends to how the novice externalises herself and her inexperience by focusing on Burney's treatment of adolescence. The unformed character, the minor, is central to the novel form, but not because the form brings the minor into majority.

A book about inexperience does not reach maturation simply by coming to its final chapter. The book's final section on *Emma* begins by reminding its reader that its author is herself 'ambivalent about endings' (p. 127). In previous chapters, Hershinow highlighted the power of the novice to orient the fictional world around her own vision of the real world: one that does not accord with what others experience as the real world. Emma is slightly too experienced to be such a novice, but her unyielding sense of what the world can and should be, and how it should be ordered and managed, makes her something of an older sister to the characters of earlier chapters.

Throughout, Hershinow draws attention not to the life being led by the novice, but the life that *could* be led. Hershinow's novices and the novels they populate work in a register of the could be, could have been, should be, should have been, might be and might have been. They are figures that, by lighting up alternative stories and lives to the ones being lived, suggest that social, cultural and political configurations could be other than they are. The novice asks those with experience to unlearn the ways of the world in the service of creating a different—even better—one.

Those of us who love fiction and take it seriously—especially those of us who believe that fiction's power is not merely, only, or primarily about descripting a social world—can draw on Hershinow's treatment of the novice to enrich and deepen our own accounts of fiction's capacity to take its own measure of the distance between the world in which we live and its world made of words.

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Tom Keymer, *Jane Austen: Writing, Society, Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), xiv+192 pp. ISBN 978-0-1988-6190-4; £10.99 (hb).

How many countenances does Jane Austen wear? Accounts in scholarly and popular venues of her as a woman, as a cultural figure, and as a novelist are varied, nuanced and contradictory; on some views, she and her fiction are reactionary, or at least conservative; on others, she gives voice to the precariat. She's alternately legible as someone of a specific time and place and class and rank, and a cipher, whose image is made and remade, across time and place with the power to drive and respond to shifts in social, political and cultural fashions. Tom Keymer's elegantly restrained, satisfyingly slim little volume, *Jane Austen: Writing, Society, Politics*, is a comprehensive, generous and open-handed account that takes seriously the variety of 'Austens' that exist even as it holds fast to its own vision of the author and her work. The book itself is less than 150 pages but is exacting and wide-ranging. Keymer covers issues ranging from Austen's narrative voice to her position as a wartime author, to her engagement with racial matters.

Keymer sticks close to Austen. In this sense he takes full reality of the fact that critics today can orient themselves to their subject matter in a variety of ways, which wasn't necessarily the case in the heyday of critical distance. His incisive prose doesn't carry her irony but does match her preciseness. He doesn't so much discard versions of Austen as refines his own. He writes: 'The following chapters

a special issue of *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640–1830*, 15.2 (2025), titled 'Affective and Emotional Encounters in/with British Women's Writing, 1600–1800'.

Katherine Voyles holds a PhD in English from the University of California, Irvine. From 2010 to 2020 she lectured at the University of Washington, Bothell. Her articles on miniaturisation and magnification in Austen's novels appear in *INTERFACES* and *Persuasions*, and she engaged with the 2022 *Persuasion* directed by Carrie Cracknell for the *Jane Austen Review*. She currently works for the US Government and previously served as co-managing editor of *The Strategy Bridge*. The views here are her own and do not reflect official US Government policy.