



Governess: The Lives and Times of the Real Jane Eyres

By Ruth Brandon

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The rise and fall of the English governess, the domestic heroine who inspired Victorian literature's greatest authors.

Between the 1780s and the end of the nineteenth century, an army of sad women took up residence in other people's homes, part and yet not part of the family, not servants, yet not equals. To become a governess, observed Jane Austen in *Emma*, was to "retire from all the pleasures of life, of rational intercourse, equal society, peace and hope, to penance and mortification for ever." However, in an ironic paradox, the governess, so marginal to her society, was central to its fiction?partly because governessing was the fate of some exceptionally talented women who later wrote novels based on their experiences. But personal experience was only one source, and writers like Wilkie Collins, William Makepeace Thackeray, Henry James, and Jane Austen all recognized that the governess's solitary figure, adrift in the world, offered more novelistic scope than did the constrained and respectable wife. Ruth Brandon weaves literary and social history with details from the lives of actual governesses, drawn from their letters and journals, to craft a rare portrait of real women whose lives were in stark contrast to the romantic tales of their fictional counterparts. *Governess* will resonate with the many fans of Jane Austen and the Brontës, whose novels continue to inspire films and books, as well as fans of *The Nanny Diaries* and other books that explore the longstanding tension between mothers and the women they hire to raise their children.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Before publishing her feminist manifesto, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft spent less than a year as a governess for an aristocratic Irish family, where she socialized with her employers, entranced her pupils and bewitched and unsettled her mistress. Her less gifted sisters spent much of their miserable adult lives as governesses in a variety of positions at the mercy of an uncertain market. Freethinker Claire Clairmont endured a hideous breakup with her lover, Lord Byron, and the death of their toddler daughter before spending 20 financially precarious but not altogether unpleasant years as a governess. Brandon offers plenty of absorbing nuggets about the travails of governesses, particularly among the insecure English middle classes who sought to imitate aristocratic lifestyles. But as Brandon (*The Life and Many Deaths of Harry Houdini*) acknowledges, her subjects (who also include, among others, Anna Leonowens, who inspired *The King and I*) are exceptional rather than representative of the average 19th-century unmarried woman compelled to spend a lifetime in service. And much in these well-written biographical sketches is far outside the boundaries of the women's experiences as governesses. Illus. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [The New Yorker](#)

In nineteenth-century England, girls were most commonly educated by governesses; the system was also a way of absorbing the country's "huge pool of spinsters." (The 1851 census found that thirty per cent of women above the age of twenty were single.) For upper- and middle-class women forced to earn a living, it represented one of the only respectable employments, and often a dreaded inevitability: after succumbing to the profession, in 1820, Claire Clairmont, the cosmopolitan stepsister of Mary Shelley and the mother of Byron's child, wrote in her journal, "Think of thyself as a stranger and traveller on the earth, to whom none of the many affairs of this world belong." This exploration of the lives of six governesses is as entertaining as the contemporary works of fiction such lives inspired ("Jane Eyre" chief among them), and although the bulk of the primary source material is not new, Brandon displays a keen understanding of a complex educational system that kept its subjects ignorant even while purporting to enlighten.

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Review

"[Brandon] never loses her profound empathy and passion for her subjects' travails." *Kirkus Reviews*

"If there is a heroic governess in Brandon's survey--a woman able to triumph over the strictures of the position--it is a third Wollstonecraft sister, Mary...Wollstonecraft's political writings and romantic entanglements have made her story well-known, but Brandon's view of her through the prism of governessing makes it fresh.

Brandon's governess chronicles are poignant....Nowadays, when the academy is stocked with feminists who fret about patriarchal depredations that escape the notice of everybody else, it is important to remember what a great, necessary and arduous achievement the education of women was. These governesses still have something to teach us." *Wall Street Journal*

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something to teach us.” *Wall Street Journal*

“A masterly survey....even when donning her sociologist's hat, [Brandon] is still lively as well as humane...a book about what might have been a worthy dry topic instead fairly sizzling with fascination.” *Washington Times*

“Brandon presents a poignant portrait of governesses in 18th- and 19th-century England. Using letters, journals, and other writings of the time, she sheds light on the female circumstance by showing how these women, some of whom eventually became famous, lived and wrote about their solitary lives in the employment of wealthy families....As a biographer, she provides brilliantly detailed backgrounds on her subjects, leaving the reader wanting still more....a very interesting look into the struggle to create parity between the sexes in this era, especially regarding education. Recommended for both public and academic libraries.” *Library Journal*

“Brandon offers plenty of absorbing nuggets about the travails of governesses, particularly among the insecure English middle classes who sought to imitate aristocratic lifestyles. But as Brandon acknowledges, her subjects (who also include, among others, Anna Leonowens, who inspired *The King and I*) are exceptional rather than representative of the average 19th-century unmarried woman compelled to spend a lifetime in service. And much in these well-written biographical sketches is far outside the boundaries of the women's experiences as governesses.” *Publishers Weekly*

“[Brandon] never loses her profound empathy and passion for her subjects' travails.” *Kirkus Reviews*

“Beautifully told, effortlessly thoughtful...” *(UK Telegraph)*

“The accounts of these women's lives are riveting, and the conclusions of this excellent book thoughtful and beautifully expressed.” *(UK Independent)*

“Brandon's book addresses a remarkably interesting subject, exploring the real-life experiences that supplied so rich a vein of literature. It has numerous ramifications, and the surrounding subjects of the drive for women's formal education and the oppressive legal nature that the 19th-century alternative of marriage was formed by are covered as well.” *(UK Spectator)*

“My personal lead title has to be Ruth Brandon's excellent *GOVERNESS*. With *Jane Eyre* echoing throughout the text, Brandon describes the lives of governesses ... a most worthwhile subject, revealing the truth about a profession most of us encounter only through fiction.” *(UK Publishing News history issue)*

“Engrossing.” *(UK Literary Review)*

“This fascinating history paints a vivid picture, from Mary Wollstonecraft and the Brontës to Anna Leonowens (the inspiration for *The King and I*).” *(UK Sainsbury's Magazine)*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Manuel Jett:

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Peter Barba:

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