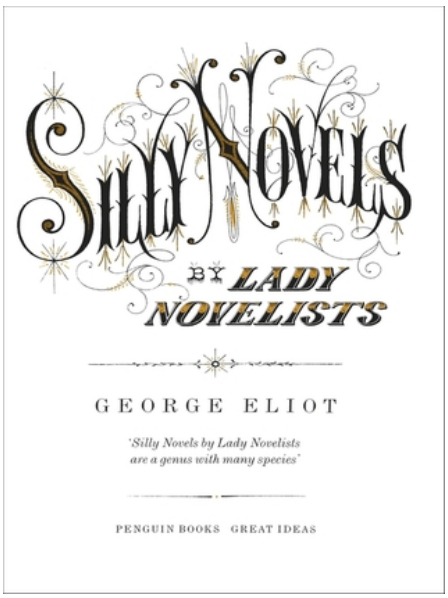

Silly Novels by Lady Novelists

George Eliot

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Silly Novels by Lady Novelists George Eliot
Describing the silliness and feminine fatuity of many popular books by lady novelists, George Eliot perfectly skewers the formulaic yet bestselling works that dominated her time, with their loveably flawed heroines.

Essay first published for Westminster Review in 1856.

Silly Novels by Lady Novelists Details

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From Reader Review Silly Novels by Lady Novelists for online ebook

Coremi says

Ensayo mordaz, una crítica aguda cargada de ironía. Los ejemplos de los que se sirve la autora están muy bien seleccionados. Y creo que este género que ella denomina "de artimaña y confección" puede aplicarse no sólo a la novela romántica, sino también a las películas y telenovelas. Veo lejano el día que estas historias edulcoradas de heroínas que enamoran a todo hombre rico terminen. Por lo que este ensayo no ha perdido vigencia.
Lectura para reír y reflexionar.

Ana says

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Qué pena que buena parte de este debate siga tan vivo hoy en día.

(Pero que no se nos olvide que, aunque escriban las autoras, el concepto de "literatura femenina" no fue cosa suya, y mucho menos su posición en el canon).

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wang Mu says

funny read.
almost 300 years passed,the romantic plots are still that way.

Akylina says

Reading George Eliot's non-fiction/literary reviews was quite refreshing and intriguing, as I had only read her fiction before.

The first essay, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', which is also the one that gives this collection its title, is the one that initially piqued my interest in purchasing this book. Eliot makes some specific references to some books written by lady novelists at her time, which she does not quite think deserve to be called literary achievements. The heroines of such novels are usually extremely intelligent and extremely well-educated (some of them are able to read Greek and Latin classics in the original languages, despite their young age) and are often admired by the men that surround them, who also appear to be rather jealous of their literary magnificence. Eliot's writing is witty, poignant and it makes you smile in understanding at most of the points she makes. I thoroughly enjoyed this one.

Unfortunately, I cannot say the same about the rest of the essays in this collection. Most of them were focused on specific authors or specific works and critiqued them, but since I was not at all familiar with any

of these works or authors, I couldn't really find them interesting. The second essay, focused on French women writers (and particularly on Madame de Sablé) and even though it was informative, I found it too long and full of details.

I had high hopes for the last essay, titled 'Translations and Translators', since I find this topic very interesting, but I was kind of disappointed here, too. It was a very short piece that focused mainly on German translations, and since I don't know German at all, I couldn't, once again, relate in the slightest.

Despite my inability to fully appreciate most of the essays due to their topics, I really enjoyed Eliot's writing style and it made me want to seek more of her non-fiction works.

Daniel Wright says

Only a female author can get away with writing anything with a title like that, I think. Eliot rips into her less able contemporaries with sweeping and scathing judgements that sometimes made me chuckle out loud. More seriously, though, she rightly observes that the tawdry produce of many writers at the time led to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes, and thus justifying the continued subjection of women. One can easily see why Eliot - along with other authors of the time, such as the Brontës - chose to use a male pseudonym.

Apart from the title essay, this little collection includes a number of Eliot's reviews, the substance of which was largely beyond me, but the purpose of which is to expound her central point in more detail.

Keli Doria says

Y yo que creía que no leía novelas rosas, la verdad me equivoque.
Ella es una genia, el modo en que critica es fascinante.

Marivi Sanz says

If you want to read George Eliot hilariously turning to shreds many of the novels written by female authors during her time, this is your book.

Rikke says

It has taken me ages to read this fairly short little book. It has been weighing heavily on my mind, and yet I haven't been able to concentrate on it fully. Non-fiction has never agreed with me when stressed, and apparently Eliot is no exception to this rule in spite of my eternal love for her writing.

The titular essay in "Silly Novels" is by far the best. In it Eliot discusses the ridiculous amount of female novels in the romantic era; the sensation novelist writing about a beautiful main character who falls in love with a duke under drastic circumstances.

Eliot argues that the many silly novels give a bad name to the female novelist in general, making it impossible for the actual talented female writers to get recognition for their work and therefore forcing them to take on a pseudonym (as Eliot in fact did herself).

The remaining essays are very period-specific, focusing on a particular work and making it hard for the modern reader who perhaps haven't read all of the novels which are being discussed by Eliot. I did however find the essay comparing Margaret Fuller to Mary Wollstonecraft very interesting as well.

All in all – an interesting little collection of essays, but very dated and very specific. Sometimes even limited in their very Victorian outlook on the world.

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dracos99 says

Me he divertido mucho leyendo este libro, en el que la autora destripa de la manera más cruel posible algunas novelas románticas victorianas, haciendo gala de una ironía exquisita. No me extraña que, para evitar comparaciones, Mary Ann Evans decidiera escribir usando un pseudónimo masculino.
Por cierto, que la vida de la escritora daría para muchos libros ya que fue una adelantada a su época, tanto personal como profesionalmente: buscó su independencia económica a la muerte de su padre; vivía sola hasta la treintena; fue novelista, poetisa, periodista y traductora; fundó una editorial; convivió con un hombre casado hasta que este falleció (del que tomó su nombre para usar como pseudónimo); y, posteriormente, se casó con un hombre veinte años más joven que él. Una mujer admirable!!!

Maria Clara says

Siempre me llama la atención ver a un escritor criticar el trabajo de un compañero, como si se diera por hecho que él está por encima de la media o en la cúspide de los elegidos. Pero en este caso es para taparse los ojos. Entiendo que todos tengamos un criterio sobre X libro o autor, pero este ensayo es "contra las mujeres ociosas que no tienen nada más a hacer que deleitarnos con su recargada prosa" (por favor, entiéndase la ironía) Aun así, y curiosamente, no he podido evitar darme cuenta de que la idea general de las novelas románticas de mediados de 1850 sigue vigente hoy en día. Los mismos arquetipos de heroínas y galanes... ¿Tan poco hemos avanzado?

Morgan says

I loved this essay!

Wondering why George Eliot uses a male name instead of her own or why she chose to write realist fiction? This essay doesn't tell you either of those exactly, but they give you the basic idea.

This essay is mainly satire, but with truth. She goes after some "lady novelists" at her time who most people today never heard of...for a reason. From the excerpts she gives us, they seemed like bad writers, to me too. Most of the "silly novels" were sappy romances with unrealistic dialogue and narration.

What I loved most about this essay wasn't the stabbing at these "lady novelist," although agree with her, but

the overall message she had at the end. She deafened women who didn't have an education (or a good one) and wrote great novels. Most of these "silly novels" she points out showed too much of there education to the point it was snobbish writing as she points out.

Some of this book can seem outdated, but most of it is still true today. Anyone can write a novel these days. You don't need a college degree. Some of the greatest books of all time were written by people who never went to school or they had limited education.

I should say this essay reminded me of Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Parker, two other writer I admire and they admire Gorge Eliot. Eliot is mostly known for her novels, which is fine, but I think this essay should be more well known too.

Almu says

Cuando empecé a leer no sabía que lo que tenía entre manos era un ensayo. Creía que sería una novela muy cortita del género que critica la autora jajajajaja
Ha sido curioso ver cómo desmenuza este tipo de novelas. A partir de ahora las leeré recordando este ensayo

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Carm9n says

My impressions here,
http://carmenyamigos.blogspot.com.es/...

Antonomasia says

I'd loved the title of this essay since I first heard of it in my early teens, yet hadn't read it until now. Its existence must have been one of the reasons - along with the pseudonym - I always felt more of a fan of George Eliot than of Austen or the Brontes (with exceptions for *Northanger Abbey* and *Wildfell Hall*).

I've cut down on the number of community reviews I read on GR, and haven't looked at these ones on this page for a while. In general, the title would be controversial these days, because of the strand of [Anglo-American?] feminism which looks at highly feminised aspects of culture and how they have been devalued in some quarters. (This review discussion gives some recent examples in film without going into the politics.) Feminisms are ever contradictory, and the previous coexists alongside efforts to get manufacturers to make children's toys and products less gendered. (I suspect that the latter, as well as obviously being more characteristic of parents, includes women who are older than the predominantly-twentysomethings I see arguing online for the respect of 'girly' culture.) I've put off reading Eliot's essay a few times because I wasn't looking forward to writing a GR review in this tiringly push-me-pull-you context.

Here, in any case, is how I feel personally about this issue. Popular and commercial culture pushes these things very heavily, whether it's pink plastic toys, chicklit and its successors in fiction, or romcom films. In most contexts outside academic and intellectual circles (and even people who inhabit those circles may spend significant proportions of time outside them, e.g. students and artists in bill paying jobs, or anyone among

certain relatives or friends) these things are considered 'normal'. They are hard to get away from. There is a bunch of stuff which seems to need defending mostly to specific corners of academia and the literati. If a man doesn't like sports or airport thrillers, he's only weird to the blokey blokes. If you're a woman and you reject romcoms and so forth, and would be happy never to hear any more about them for the rest of your life, you get wrong from both mainstream women *and* a bunch of feminists. Do the latter really know the purgatorial tedium of life in an office with a load of chicklit readers who subtly expect you to be more like them?
I am not interested in going around defending the essentialist culture which means Francine Pascal, creator of *Sweet Valley High*, is statistically my most-read author because of an idea I picked up when younger about 'trying to do things properly and normally' and the library had hundreds of her books. Or, earlier made me shy about asking for a Scalextric until after too much money had been spent on My Little Pony buildings and further large toys weren't allowed. Let alone a load of crap ideas about being a woman relative to relationships with men, which I got from magazines, occasional chicklit, and women's forums* - which it took years to realise didn't fit my personality and vague queerness. I know most feminists have a beef with those sources too, but the content of this culture they say is devalued is mostly full of crap and is over-valued in many quarters, and I think it's a terrible rallying point. As for knitting - well, trying that out again, inspired by a related fashion (although I knew I used to hate it) wasn't a good move, but at least I managed to sell most of the kit, and it's not pernicious like the above given its varied images these days.

There is always going to be popular culture. You don't have to like it, or all of it. If you don't, it's nice to have the luxury of an existence where you can ignore it most of the time. Not everyone who'd like to, does. Though some people put themselves in the way of stuff they dislike just so they can rant about it.

I don't know if George Eliot *had* to read the trashy popular novels of her day; quite possibly given that she made money from book reviewing. [How quaint!]

The title essay is wonderfully sardonic. I'd forgotten she could be funny.
Following a quote from a 'silly novel' in which a four-year old makes a long speech, including Ossianic similes of Scottish Highland scenery:
We are not surprised to learn that the mother of this infant phenomenon, who exhibits symptoms so alarmingly like those of adolescence repressed by gin, is herself a phoenix.
On a villain:
He is not only a romantic poet, but a hardened rake and cynical wit; yet his deep passion for Lady Umfraville has so impoverished his epigrammatic talent, that he cuts a poor figure in conversation.

Facets of the novels she criticises are recognisable today. (Hm, if I'd never read any chicklit, I wouldn't be able to say this.)
- The 'mind and millinery' subgenre.
Chicklit heroines aren't necessarily advanced to great wealth - much as 'Shopaholic' would like - but those 90s-00s novels often feature characters with, or studying for, higher degrees who never talk as if they're academic; one allusion to a topic will apparently do fine to convince, and the rest of the time the person (male or female) is a bland airhead.
Eliot lambasts and quotes long and improbable philosophical speeches made by heroines of Victorian popular fiction. They are indeed silly. However, at least they show the woman thinks in detail about the subjects she's alleged to.
These very brainy heroines evidently have no novelty in Eliot's time - just as, in the contemporary British fictional world, Oxbridge would award millions of degrees whilst other universities were almost empty. Taking a longer historical view, it seems like significant progress that these women are intelligent and agentic in a way that Samuel Richardson's heroines would barely be able to conceive of. Young female

readers of the 1850s were dreaming of being a different sort of person - more modern and less passive than I'd assumed. Titles and money, though, remain essential to their leverage - as middle-class Eliot points out. Interesting to see 'frothy' used - I'd understood it to be a contemporary entertainment and publishing industry adjective for romcom/chicklit material, not well understood elsewhere. (I'd tried it out a few times.) It's evidently quite old.

- The 'oracular' novels' closest contemporary equivalent may be New Age tinged books like *Eat Pray Love*. Or perhaps books that assume angels are real. Or 'Christian fiction', which one rarely comes across in the UK without looking specifically - I know little about it, though suspect it's more like the Evangelical novels Eliot also has a go at. The 'oracular' is a more specifically Victorian phenomenon, with characteristic gothic-tinged landscapes alongside a dash of High Church Anglicanism.

Popular historical novels of the day were apparently inclined to the overly grandiloquent an humourless. These days we have other tropes, such as 'the only modern man' and thousands of heroines with contemporary feminist values who somehow grew up hundreds of years ago, with conservative parents. The tendency to write about aristocrats has lessened, though not so much we don't recognise her complaints.

Eliot's principal objection to these authors, though, is ultimately because the status of women still had a long way to go. She is concerned they may hamper advancement, by making it look as if educating a woman produces someone who shows off their learning pompously, inaccurately and at inopportune moments. [Did many men actually read these books, however?] Her summation of the silly lady novelists makes them sound a lot like know-it-all callow teenagers who show off whenever they can, in order to assert their sense of superiority, whilst coming off as naive and embarrassing to those a little older. Perhaps the level of respect, responsibility and access to information commonly given to women at the time made them feel similarly to these teenagers - and only the very strongest personalities and talents, such as Eliot, broke through that, their success also aided to one extent or another by luck and other circumstances.

Already a problem 150 years ago, and infinitely worse now, is another issue she raises: a great many people write bad books and, not knowing how bad they are, have them published. As she says, it's easy for a person to know if they are tone deaf as regards music; less so in writing fiction.

Eliot's writing is infinitely clearer and more readable than the overly ornate quotes from the 'silly novels'. I find the books interesting to hear about, but not to the extent of those people who write theses on them - am grateful for the excerpts.

This Penguin Great Ideas book also contains five other essays.
[Incidentally, I hope the series eventually contains more than two volumes by women dealing with primary subjects other than feminism.]

Geraldine Jewsbury's *Constance Herbert*
Review of a largely forgotten novel, about three sisters who decide not to marry so they don't pass on inherited insanity in their family. (I wonder if it was something we now know to be multifactorial, or a disease like Huntington's, where in the absence of testing and contraception this sounds a good decision.) Jewsbury makes all the rejected suitors turn out to be awful. Eliot takes issue with 'the very questionable satisfaction of discovering that objects once cherished were in fact worthless'. I agree that it's good to have something nice to remember if one must give up on some part of life.
Also interesting to see that even Eliot appears to subscribe to the view, perhaps influenced by the rise of

science, that there are single ultimate truths waiting to be discerned about a) what men want from women in relationships (so many terrible self-help books talk as if there were) and b) the [then-current] position of women in society.

Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollestonecraft

Am unfamiliar with Fuller; at any rate, Eliot finds many commonalities between the writings of these two early feminists, published 50 years apart on opposite sides of the Atlantic. One could see the essay as, initially, written in drag, in the voice of a moderate chap who thinks things should be improved a little for women, but we shouldn't exaggerate the abilities of the poor dears. However, this belies an argument evidently important to Eliot, used not just later in this essay, but also about black American slaves in the following piece about Harriet Beecher Stowe: if these people are portrayed as such paragons of virtue whilst they are oppressed, is that not dangerously close to arguing that their oppressed state is good for them and for society, and that they may be less virtuous and able if given more freedom? It's not one heard these days, in my experience; any rate it says a lot about Victorian society and is interesting from that viewpoint.

Bits and pieces about how men and women interact in relationships, now considered to be down to personalities and attachment styles, were, it seems, commonly thought to be all - not just partly - about educational level. I found something similar in Frederika Bremer, Eliot's review of whom is also in this collection. It's one of those opinions probably necessary at the time in order to effect social change, and which would eventually be revised.

Having read a little of Wollestonecraft's biography, I would love to know if she was criticising "the clinging affection of ignorance" - as mentioned in a long quote - from a viewpoint of self-awareness.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred*, Charles Reade's *It Is Never Too Late To Mend* and Fredrika Bremer's *Hertha*

Apparently people loved *Dred* at the time; it's hardly known of now in the UK; not sure about the US. The Reade sounds laughably formulaic - it even features farmers named Fielding and Meadows - though Eliot writes of it as we might of a reasonable but not top-notch bit of contemporary litfic. I used qualifiers 'largely forgotten' and 'hardly known' earlier because I *have* read Bremer, who's far from famous here now. Eliot writes of the Swede's previous books as a half-forgotten craze of ten years previously. I quite enjoyed *The Colonel's Family* but can see why - if one is being strictly literary, not reading it for historical value - a critic might say Bremer uses a *curious...combination in her novels of the vapourishly affected and unreal with the most solidly Dutch sort of realism.*

Translations and Translators

A recent Goodreads discussion (coincidentally under a review of *Middlemarch*) concluded that contemporary translators love dissing each other's work, as a way to sell more of their own, allegedly more accurate, versions. Here Eliot doesn't have her own editions of Kant or German lyric poetry to flog, but she's critical enough of others' translations when she sees fit, and of the shortage of good intellect among English translators in her day. Unlike the current lot, who concentrate on English rendering, she devotes half the piece to criticising Germans' translations of Shakespeare.

Woman in France: Madame de Sablé

The second of the essays in the book, and the longest. I read it last. Even more so than the piece on Wollestonecraft & Fuller, it begins as if masked. A certain disdain for the writing of women other than the French. This sentence: *Heaven forbid that we should enter on a defence of French morals, most of all in relation to marriage!* A typically C19th racialisation of nationalities in which it's determined likely, for physiological reasons, that a French woman has a greater chance of being intellectual than the 'heavier' Teutonic or English type; Eliot wouldn't have considered herself a petite, delicate French type. (Later she concentrates on the biography and life of the salonnière, and ends with an idealised exhortation about a mariage of minds.) The beginning reminds *me* of the mischievous early days of the internet, when you could

be anyone you liked for a while if you could talk the talk; I miss that. But I would love to know what Eliot thought of this enterprise (published anonymously) and what writing like this meant to her. Was it a game, or a burden? Perhaps not the same one every time. Searched in Kathryn Hughes' biog of Eliot, which I read too long ago to remember unprompted: nothing from her letters about this piece, but it's implied that her ex-lover and sometime boss found it embarrassing and tried to distance himself, whilst still publishing it.

The opening lines: *In 1847, a certain Count Leopold Ferri died at Padua, leaving a library composed of works written by women, in various languages, and this library amounted to nearly 32 000 volumes.* ... If the catalogue were available today, the addings in certain corners of Goodreads might crash the to-read lists.

Re. Madame herself; arguably the first *salonnière*: not much surprised me. I disapprove of my own judgement because what stood out most were some OCD-like tendencies around disease and cleanliness (though it made more sense then - and she made it to 70, which many didn't). I came back to an old favourite idea, that it was often people with more extreme temperaments, or who were unafraid of disapproval, who changed things. If you have unusually refined taste as she did, and are socially influential at the right time, you may change taste in your direction. She worried about certain things, but, whilst she and her salon influenced the cynical La Rochefoucauld, *her own maxims are as full of the goodness which La Rochefoucauld wants, as they are empty of the style which he possesses.* She is presented as one whose greatest talents were social, in drawing out the greatness of others [men].
Arguably it was a man, G.H. Lewes, who drew out Eliot's greatest talents whilst she wrote her novels.

Now, this is one of the reasons I don't read more books of essays. They make me want, near enough, to write another one in reply.

* My overall argument is always that one shouldn't blame the art (or product or whatever) as what the person gets from it, esp when young, is down to their predisposition, upbringing, environment etc. I could give those reasons for all of these wee first world problems. I just wanted to let off steam with a rant, the way I see some feminists ranting about how everyone loves, say, sleazy male narrators and doesn't question them. In their solar system the default response hasn't historically been - from anyone apart from a handful of critics who look further - "eww, creepy, I couldn't read it and I didn't like the character".

Ilenia Zodiaco says

Il manifesto contro i libri di merda, datato 1856.
