



# Governess: The Lives and Times of the Real Jane Eyres

*Ruth Brandon*

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**Governess: The Lives and Times of the Real Jane Eyres** Ruth Brandon

**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 Bronte's 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.

## Governess: The Lives and Times of the Real Jane Eyres Details

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## **From Reader Review *Governess: The Lives and Times of the Real Jane Eyres* for online ebook**

### **Anika says**

This book both succeeded and failed for me. As a collection of mini-biographies of a variety of fascinating women, it absolutely succeeds - the narrative is one of the most engaging and consistently interesting I've ever read for a book of this kind, and makes me want to seek out the author's other biographies. And the historical information and contexts are interesting. And yet, as a real study of the idea of the governess, the socio-political and gendered (ooh, my college essay-writing self comes back) implications therein, she never really delves much below the surface. Still, definitely interesting and entertaining.

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### **Nightwitch says**

As others have mentioned, this is not so much a book about governesses as a collection of biographies of women, some of whom (not all of whom, even) worked as governesses at some point in their lives. Brandon doesn't seem to like many of her subjects much - in the chapters on the Wollstonecraft family she veers through all the various sisters kind of at random, and I got the sense she wanted to be writing a biography of Mary rather than any of the others.

She also just doesn't seem to like them. When Mary Wollstonecraft extracts her sister from her recent marriage (and baby), Brandon confidently tells us that the only conceivable explanation is that Mary had lost her mind (!). Really? Really? Because I can think of half-a-dozen other explanations off the top of my head, most of which are far less derogatory towards Mary and frankly make a lot more sense to me - but Brandon just gives her explanation and moves on. Similarly Anna Jameson's alcoholic, depressed husband complained that if he hadn't been stuck with Anna he could have married a nice young girl, which Brandon records sympathetically - the implication is that he was alcoholic and depressed because he was stuck with an absentee wife, whereas I would argue a case could be made that part of the reason he had an absentee wife was because he was a depressive alcoholic. Anna Leonowens is described pretty unsympathetically, and while she was indeed probably a pretty unpleasant person in many ways, it's just weird to be reading a biography where the biographer doesn't seem to want to be writing about her subjects and doesn't seem to like them very much.

The final chapter, on various Victorian feminists, just had too many characters to cover them adequately, and once again Brandon passes judgment on them in ways that could have used more explanation, for example wondering what Person A "made" of Person B's letter to Person C while not ever telling us if Person A was actually given access to said letter. Brandon's good at synthesizing information and producing brief readable biographies, but in my two-book experience of her biographies, she doesn't necessarily pick subjects she actually wants to write about and about which she's able to find enough information.

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### **Jenny Brown says**

Disappointing! I was hoping to learn about the lives of governesses, but this book turns out to be a collection of microbiographies of a few women, mostly famous for other reasons, who at some point in their lives were

governesses, though much of the narrative describes the parts of their lives when they weren't.

Most egregious is the fifty-five pages devoted to the life of Claire Clairmont of which perhaps fifty pages describe her origins, her experiences living with the Shelleys, and her miserable relationship with Byron, all fascinating, but having nothing to do with governessing. Almost as an afterthought the author finally gives us a few pages about her governessing career towards the end before going off to describe her last years. The same pattern repeats elsewhere.

In the end, I didn't learn anything more about governessing from the text of this book than I learned from what the author told us in a few paragraphs in her introduction.

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### **Naima Haviland says**

I'm a big fan of Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, the Bronte sisters -- all 19th century stories pitting a determined heroine against the social perils of her day. A lot of those heroines are governesses, so I was very keen to read Ruth Brandon's nonfiction account of the lives of actual governesses. One thing Brandon relates right off is that existing material on governesses is scarce. Governesses were plentiful but peripheral figures in 18th/19th century life. It was a migrant-worker position -- an underpaid, underappreciated job where they got little respect and no benefits. There weren't any other jobs for unmarried women, so the system just perpetuated itself. The writings of governesses weren't preserved unless they were extraordinary for other reasons. Each chapter of 'Governesses' focuses on one of these extraordinary women who must represent thousands of women whom history forgot.

The women in 'Governesses' include Mary Wollstonecraft (a famous 18th century feminist author and mother of Mary Shelley, the author of Frankenstein), Claire Clairmont (best known for being Lord Byron's discarded mistress and for a time an insider in his mega-famous crowd), Anna Leonowens (who wrote the book on which Anna and The King of Siam was based), and the feminist reformers who achieved the start of equal education for women and helped end the governess system. My favorite chapter covered Nelly Weeton, a forgotten figure whose letters were found 100 years later in a junk shop and published. Her 'unextraordinary' life is full of sadness, fear, strength, determination, love, and sheer survival.

I liked this book, but I'm struck not just by how much times have changed for women but how recently they've changed. Personal example: it was 1969, Pittsburg, PA. My first grade teacher introduced our class to a school visitor. "She's a doctor!" our teacher said. It was like a martian dropped into our midst. We just stared at her in silence. I can't tell you how weird that moment felt. Women weren't doctors!

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### **Rebecca Huston says**

An interesting look at what has become a historical romance standby -- the governess. Very interesting, but not as complete as I would have liked it to have been. Still, it's worth reading.

For the complete review, please go here:  
<http://www.mylot.com/post/3023887/rev...>

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## **GypsyBookworm says**

I didn't read the entirety of this book, just chapters three and four about Mary Wollstonecraft and Claire Clairmont as supplementary to "Young Romantics" by Daisy Hay, which covers the life of Wollstonecraft's daughter and Claire's stepsister, Mary Shelley. A lot of the overall material was the same, but since these figures only make up two chapters of the totality of the book their lives were accelerated and in places abbreviated. The parts on Wollstonecraft were nice, since her life was not really covered in "Young Romantics" as she is dead when the book begins so it provided a nice prequel to that book for me. In many ways it was substantially harder for her than her daughter to gain a foothold in the literary and intellectual world. Wollstonecraft had to do much of it on her own, coming from a humble background with little formal education, while her daughter had the benefit of her brilliant parents as well as her independently wealthy and talented husband, Percy Shelley. This book did not romanticize their lives as much, instead highlighting the struggles and unfairness of the world these women lived in more so than "Young Romantics." The author does not let Percy, or Lord Byron in Claire's case, come away unscathed or uncensored for their hand in the turns their lives took including money woes, multiple pregnancies, and the death of five children between them. Claire was also treated sympathetically in this book. The original third wheel, she was always second best to both Byron and Shelley while they lived and never completely felt like she belonged in that dazzling romantic world they created. Honestly, what I took away from both this and "Young Romantics" about Claire was that her single most regret in life was that she was not Mary Shelley, her stepsister, who she felt she could never compete with in terms of magnetic personality, talent, or attractiveness to Percy. Not only did she not end up with either of the men of her choice, but her daughter Allegra met a hapless fate sacrificed as a pawn to her tumultuous life. In the end, she died solely defined by who she had known in her youth, obscure and all but destitute and having accomplished nothing of note to compare to her myriad of friends. In all, this was interesting but for a fuller version of Claire's life and Mary Shelley, who is only casually covered in this, consult "Young Romantics" by Daisy Hay.

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## **Lauren Albert says**

I'm surprised that people found the book dull and repetitive. The only thing dull and repetitive in the book was the lives of many of the women who were forced to work as governesses. The book is certainly painful because one can practically feel the walls closing in the way these women did. It is truly horrifying what some of the family members of these women were capable of doing to them (depriving them of rightful inheritances, etc.) to say nothing of the emotional abuse and neglect of some of the families they worked for.

What Brandon is describing--the awkward social position of the governess--is what some people--borrowing from anthropologists--call "liminality." The women were in an "in between" state--neither truly middle class nor truly working class. It left them without a clear social group and hence often desperately lonely. Liminal people provoke anxiety in others who don't know how to classify them and therefore how to interact with them. How could other, more well-off, women not see a possible future in the face of their children's governess (only a bankruptcy away)? If they pushed these women away physically and emotionally, made them even more alien, perhaps it was out of an unconscious desire to push that very possibility out of their own minds.

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## **Eleanore says**

Published in England under a different title: "Other People's Daughters: The Life and Times of Governesses" this work might be a key observation in an examination of different marketing trends among American and British audiences. Beyond the cover, however, it is also a very interesting and readable look at the lives of five governesses from the 18th and 19th century. Given the idiosyncrasies of the archival record, it should be no surprise that many of the figures Ms. Brandon focuses on are often famous for reasons having little to do with their relative (and occasionally merely token) experiences as governesses: Mary Wallstonecraft, Claire Clairmont- the step-sister of Mary Shelly and Lord Byron's lover, Anna Leonowens of "the King and I" fame. While these choices lend a great deal of drama and interest to the larger narrative and are, of themselves, thoroughly enjoyable, these selections come at a cost of building a more resonant image of the life of more ordinary governesses - which to be sure must have been fairly dull and prosaic - but nonetheless important for the purposes of the book. The work also concludes somewhat clumsily amidst the beginning of the women's suffrage movement and the battle to admit women to university examinations.

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## **D says**

Any romantic notions of earlier times? If you were an unmarried lady between the ages of 20-40, you'd be working as a governess and no longer a lady because ladies didn't work. I'm dizzy. And fascinated. What about after 40? You don't want to know.

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## **Caroline says**

We all know the stereotypes from history, politics, and culture. From Jane Eyre to *The Turn of the Screw*, literature abounds with the figure of the governess - quiet, shy, meek, downtrodden, neither fish nor fowl, superior to the servants but not the equal of her employers, educated and well-born but brought low usually through the financial upheavals of her male family members, forced to make her own way in the world via one of the few career paths available to unmarried women.

Ruth Brandon chronicles what might be called the rise and fall of the governess, from the late 18th century before state education when no self-respecting wealthy family would be without one, through to the establishment of the first female university college at Cambridge in the late 19th century. She tells the history through letters and diaries of familiar and perhaps less familiar figures - Agnes Porter, Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Leonowens, Anna Jameson and others. It is hard not to feel immense sympathy for these women; and, inevitably, weaving through their tales is the history of the women's movement, the slow indignant chafing against women's lot in life.

I enjoyed this book, although I felt that it was less cohesive than I would have liked. Constructing each chapter around a particular individual made it feel more like a selection of mini-biographies than a really coherent tale. It felt more like a history of eight governesses in particular than a history of the profession in general, and I'm not sure some of these women are truly representative of their sisters in bondage. So a good book, well worth reading and a valuable addition to women's history, but I can't help but feel that it missed something in the execution.

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## **Sarah says**

I'm very interested in the topic and the ideas here, and I really liked the introductory chapter, but overall this was too research-paper to make for entertaining leisure reading. For me, it lacked that liveliness and narrative flow that makes some nonfiction titles go from informative to riveting.

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## **Margo Brooks says**

Well structured and organized, this book explores the lives and times of British governesses by close examination of the lives of several extraordinary women. Beginning in the late eighteenth century and ending in the mid-nineteenth century, the book chronicles changes in the social system and treatment of governesses that the rise of the middle class wrought. The large number of “excess” unmarried women (over 400,000 according to census records) and the lack of employment or social systems to support them, necessitated governessing for tens of thousands of women. And the excess of governesses meant that they could be paid low wages and treated poorly. Additionally, the rise of the middle class and closeness in social standing of employers and governesses made their working conditions even harder as employers stigmatized these women as “business failures” who had failed to find husbands. Additionally, the poor education of many governesses, and subsequent poor education of their charges, lead to even further marginalization of women during this time period. The book ends with a discussion of the early roots of feminism in Britain and improvements in women’s education that eventually lead to the end of the governess.

The women profiled in this book were extraordinary. They lead the feminist and women’s education movements and circled in highly intellectual society, but were forced to endure a profession they universally hated because there were no other options for their livelihoods. Some reviewers have criticized the book for spending as much time or more discussing the lives of these women outside of governessing, however, it is clear that that the goal of most governesses was to do anything else. And, it is rare that the lives of marginalized women are chronicled. One can only imagine how bad the lives of less extraordinary women with fewer resources open to them must have been.

The book does a very good job of blending the women’s stories with statistics and social commentary to explain how the governessing system arose, changed, and affected both society as a whole and the lives of individual women.

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## **Kirsten says**

This book has the wrong title. It should be *Governess: The Soap Opera Sex Lives of Women Who Were Governesses at Some Point, Although Of Course They Weren't Having Sex While They Were Governesses*. Brandon has one or two points, which she reiterates several times. One of those points is that being a governess was deadly dull, and most were not allowed any social life at all. So writing about their lives? The most interesting parts are when they \*weren't\* working. Brandon gets a little carried away by the exciting lives of a few of her subjects (Mary Wollstonecraft, Claire Clairmont, Anna Leonowens) - and I don't blame her for that, because that was the best part of the book. But it wasn't what it purported to be.

(Now I \*really\* want to read a steamy historical novel about Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Godwin Shelley. Yeah, that would rawk.)

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### **Ian Carmichael says**

Interesting topic - the place of the governess told through some exemplars - some famous, some not. Interesting but unevenly written. Some chapters flowed well and were well structured. Some weren't clear as to who was being written about and to what purpose.

I'm not sorry to have read it, but it could have been so much better. Jenny Uglow might have made an excellent fist of this!

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### **Lisa Mettauer says**

Before this month, I'd never heard of the Reform Firm. That was the name of a group of women in the Victorian era who fought to improve women's education, among other feminist causes. During this time when all women were supposed to be married and the property of their husbands, those who couldn't marry had very few choices. One of those few choices was becoming a governess. The English Woman's Journal was founded by two members of the Reform Firm, Barbara Leigh Smith and Bessie Rayner Parkes; they were hoping to influence old legislation that prevented women from owning property after marriage and kept women and girls from attending public schools. The Journal was published by the Victoria Press, which was run by Emily Faithfull; through the journal and the press, the women were able to employ many women to prove their theories by putting them into action.

Coincidentally, the last two books I've read involved these interesting women. *Governess: The Lives and Times of the Real Jane Eyres*, Ruth Brandon includes a chapter on the women of the Reform Firm. Actually, the book takes up with governesses much earlier. Brandon, analyzing journals, letters and literature of the time, recreates the sad lives most governesses led. She begins with Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*, who actually spent a short time as a governess before her writing career took off, and includes Claire Clairmont (Lord Byron's mistress); Anna Leonowens, the model for *The King and I*, among others. Brandon shows how precarious governesses' lives were; always at the whim of their employers, they could be fired for any reason - getting on the wrong side of the mother, for example. As the middle class grew in the Industrial Revolution, more families were able to hire governesses to educate their girls, but they didn't have the large estates that the wealthy did. As a result, governesses were forced to live intimately with the families, causing much strife. And wages dropped to unliveable levels. The final chapter tells how the Reform Firm began to work at challenging the social mores regarding women's education, though it was still many years before schools allowed girls in.

*The Sealed Letter* by Emma Donoghue is a novel based on an illustrious divorce case in 1864. Helen Smith, British, but raised in Italy and India, captured the heart of a much older man, the Vice-Admiral Henry Codrington. They have a few good years of marriage and have two daughters. The Admiral is often away for long periods of time at sea. During one of those absences, Helen invites a good friend of the family, Emily Faithfull!! (she of the Victoria Press above), to live with her and keep her company. By the time Henry comes back Helen is tired of her husband and when the arguments ensue, Emily is asked to leave. Eventually the family is off to Malta on assignment, where Helen begins to "befriend," if you know what I mean, a few



of the officers. When the family eventually returns to London, one of the officers follows, and Helen is caught. The divorce was an incredible scandal, the trial sensational with accusations of rape and a lesbian affair. Though Emily remained a force in the feminist movement until her death, her name was always associated with the scandal.

Both books were incredibly good. Brandon writes a remarkably interesting and readable social history of a small aspect of the lives of Victorian women. Donoghue captures Victorian England so well, fitting in period details without interrupting the flow of the story. All three of her characters have been perfectly rendered; no one is the victim or the victor, each is a unique individual with a complex personality. For those as interested as I am in the Victorian age, add these to your list.

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