

**Melisa Klimaszewski.** *Collaborative Dickens: Authorship and Victorian Christmas Periodicals.* Ohio UP, 2019. Pp. xii + 282. \$80. ISBN 978-0-8214-2365-3.

Between 1850 and 1867, Dickens produced special Christmas numbers of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* in which he and a selection of co-writers would contribute short stories within an overarching framework devised by Dickens himself. Melisa Klimaszewski has great experience with Dickens's Christmas numbers, having edited several of them alongside Melissa Valiska Gregory for Hesperus Classics. Those editions are notable for including not just Dickens's contributions to the numbers, but rather replicating each number in full with Dickens's stories nestled among those of his contributors, as first published. In *Collaborative Dickens*, we see the fruits of this experience as Klimaszewski now offers an academic study of the Christmas numbers that is as much a celebration of them and their collaborative nature, as it is an introduction to the topic.

The relative obscurity of the Christmas numbers is the greatest justification for this monograph. While *A Christmas Carol* is faithfully trotted out year after year for another adaptation, these multi-authored collections of short stories remain largely unread, even among Dickensians. While there has been a growing appreciation and awareness for Dickens's work as a journalist and journal editor, the sheer bulk of material contained in Dickens's journals is often a deterrent in itself. The Christmas numbers offer a compromise of self-contained issues within the deluge, but are equally hampered by their collaborative nature which means the casual Dickens reader will often choose to focus on the solo-authored novels instead. The ultimate aim of Klimaszewski's book is to set this right by championing not only the Christmas numbers but moreover their collaborative authorship as something to be celebrated, not excused.

In her introduction, Klimaszewski states three objectives: "to read collaborative texts in their complete forms, to complicate hierarchical models of collaboration, and to acknowledge the powerful polyvocal potential of periodical forms such as the Christmas number" (9). In order to do this, she works methodically through the eighteen numbers, attempting to offer analysis as much as summary. This is an ambitious project, and the confines of a single monograph are understandably limiting here. But what Klimaszewski offers is an opening discussion, and she is to be commended for initiating interrogation of the topic. At the same time there are necessary hurdles the book has to go through, being the first lengthy study on this topic: namely having to take time to introduce each number and offer a synopsis of the individual stories within. While an article on *Bleak House* can comfortably assume reader knowledge and dive straight into discussion of individual

characters and themes, here Klimaszewski maintains a merciful awareness of her readers' likely ignorance of the source text. Her thoughtfulness means that there is an unavoidable amount of time given to summarising plots, which places further pressure on the remaining pages to achieve meaningful analysis of these numbers. The result is a working compromise in which stories are introduced, many key themes identified, and some deeper themes explored more fully, with a number of areas left for future scholars to pick up and debate further.

This is emphatically not a criticism. Rather, I applaud Klimaszewski's decision to embark on this topic and truly hope it sparks more discussion of the Christmas numbers. The areas she does cover work as potential models of discussion for the areas she does not have time to discuss, and I can foresee a number of postgraduate students keenly stepping forward to build on this work. For example, her final chapter "Coming to a Stop (1866–67)" focuses at length on the working relationship between Wilkie Collins and Dickens, with several interesting conclusions and comparisons raised. Allowing time for close focus on this one relationship allows for a nuanced and informative read and identifies how similar discussions can be teased out of Dickens's working relationship with his other collaborators. Elsewhere – in chapter three, "Orderly Travels and Generic Developments (1854–55)," for example – Klimaszewski takes a broader overview of the numbers, looking at the overall structural pattern and the trends in development as Dickens experimented with the form over successive years. Thus while this book is not able to fully cover every aspect of the Christmas numbers, it does an admirable job of exploring them and offering platforms for further discussion.

If I do have a criticism, and it is only one, it is that I would have liked a little more contextual information about the initial decisions to start these Christmas numbers. Chapter one, "Writing Christmas with 'a Bunch of People' (1850–51)" launches quickly into discussion of the content of the first numbers, and it would have been interesting to consider what Dickens's intentions may have been in producing the functionally titled "Christmas Number" in 1850. But this is one minor omission, and it seems unfair to dwell on when so much is offered in the rest of the book.

I've noted the significance of choosing the Christmas numbers as a topic, and the desire to see this kickstart wider discussion of these texts. But equally important to this book is the subject of collaboration. Klimaszewski notes in her conclusion that her "hope is that *Collaborative Dickens* makes it difficult for readers to responsibly discuss the intricacies of the Christmas number stories, or theorize authorship in them, without taking collaboration into account" (220). Dickens's canonical status favours discussion of his solo work: ideas of the inimitable do not sit well with

the concept of a writer working in company. This book makes important strides in looking at Dickens in the context of group projects, challenging the idea of him as always a dominating figure and instead looking at how other writers could complement his work, and he theirs in return. Chapter four, “Collaborative Survival and Voices Abroad (1856–57),” notes the tendency to fragment the 1856 number, *The Wreck of the Golden Mary*, and warns against it: “The text itself resists critical approaches that privilege individual authorship and encourages exploration of plural authorship as multi-layered yet cohesive” (79). Klimaszewski’s argument is that the narrative structure demands the full text rather than cherry-picked extracts from given authors; moreover that the cohesion of the various stories leads towards a unified work by many voices, rather than a disparate miscellany of distinct narratives. In a sense, the original anonymity of the numbers, rather than being a frustration, is in fact a gateway to better appreciation of the work.

Conversely, it is precisely the identification of so many supporting authors that can prompt new avenues in research, for among the few headliners such as Gaskell and Collins are a slew of lesser-known writers awaiting our full attention. While this book undoubtedly does a great service to Dickens studies, it does an even greater service to the other writers in the Christmas numbers whose stories can, literally, now be told. Klimaszewski maintains her focus on Dickens through this work, always bringing our attention to his involvement as editor as much as writer, and as such the book will prove of great interest to Dickensians, but equally the mention of so many hitherto obscure authors promises great potential again for future research areas in nineteenth-century literature. Klimaszewski offers an excellent introduction to these works; it is the pleasant responsibility of Dickensians to continue and expand that discussion.

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**Sean Grass. *The Commodification of Identity in Victorian Literature: Autobiography, Sensation, and the Literary Marketplace*.** Cambridge UP, 2019. Pp. xii + 279. \$99.99. ISBN: 978-1-108-48445-9.

**W**e’ve waited a long time for this book. In 2003, Routledge published Grass’s *The Self in the Cell: Narrating the Victorian Prisoner*. He concludes that study by saying “prison novels illustrate that self-narrative – not the subject – is invariably a matter of invention. In doing so, they set the stage for what Freud and Foucault came