

Review: Barbara Leckie, *Open Houses: Poverty, the Novel, and the Architectural Idea in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 312pp. ISBN 978-0-812-25029-9 £69.00.

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FOCUSING ON THE social conditions and the epistemological problems of representing housing in the nineteenth century, Barbara Leckie's *Open Houses: Poverty, the Novel, and the Architectural Idea in Nineteenth-Century Britain* provides us with an important re-examination of housing in nineteenth-century Britain and British fiction, with an eye toward the problem Martin Heidegger raises: how should we understand the role of the home in an age of precarity and poverty. Leckie's *Open Houses* traces the documentary and expository impulse of nineteenth-century writings on housing in order to demonstrate the way that these writings—both professional studies and works of fiction—were intended to shock the reader by exposing 'the wretchedness, unworthiness, and anti-poetic quality of housing of the poor', and, more importantly, to convince the reader of the 'urgent need for architectural reform'.¹

In both professional studies and novels, Leckie highlights the genre of the exposé as a consistent framework for the analysis of housing conditions, and one that is rooted in a nineteenth-century print tradition that depended upon 'an Enlightenment confidence in print culture to promote social justice'.² According to Leckie, for the most part, the exposé is animated by a 'keen desire to get it right, and, accordingly, to provoke political action', but it can nonetheless also fail to achieve this 'keen desire'.³ Indeed, as she explains in her provocative conclusion, '[t]he story of housing of the poor [...] is not only about the extreme erosion of housing conditions of the poor and their representation in Victorian print culture; it is also about print culture's failure to generate the changes it sought'.⁴ This second element sits in 'productive tension' with the first in order to 'look more closely at this paradigm of visibility and the mechanisms of exposé it underwrites', a lead she takes from 'the nineteenth-century documentary

¹ Barbara Leckie, *Open Houses: Poverty, the Novel, and the Architectural Idea in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018) p. 3.

² Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 9.

³ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 9.

⁴ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 240.

commentators and novelists who were themselves increasingly wary of a model to which they nevertheless continued to subscribe.⁵

This epistemological and textual model of the exposé is the primary concern of Leckie's compelling book. Situating her study within a tradition of criticism that maps 'a different story of modernity', Leckie draws on architectural critics such as Sigfried Giedion and scholars of the Victorian period like Lynda Nead, Ruth Livesey, Pamela Gilbert, Ellen Ross, Kate Flint, Michelle Allen, and Simon Joyce.⁶ What *Open Houses* brings to this well-established conversation is an explicit focus on the question of 'what house' is used to represent the 'new city life' and to help generate the 'new kind of novel' that Raymond Williams argues emerges with Charles Dickens's representation of a new urban modernity in nineteenth-century London, which was rooted in the houses and not the city's streets.⁷ Leckie argues that, instead of the comfortable home of Dickens's bourgeois reader, it is the 'housing of the poor' that embodies the new Victorian urban and literary landscape; the homes of the poor 'suggest not [...] closed and protected bourgeois interiors [...] but [...] open, unaccountable, troubling, illegible, and fractured interiors' associated with disease, unrest, and poverty.⁸ In this respect, the greatest contribution this study offers is its ability to use the porousness of these homes in order to combine the 'discourse on housing' with the more often discussed novelistic representation of the poor. This in turn reveals an intertwined political, social, cultural, and literary debate regarding both the state of housing in Britain and the best method to encourage an adequate response to the issue.

Leckie uses the concept of the exposé and its attendant discourse of interpenetration, or the ability to look 'into the houses of the poor', to interrogate such documentary texts as Edwin Chadwick's *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population* (1842) and George Godwin's *Another Blow for Life* (1859) as well as Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72), and James's *The Princess of Casamassima* (1886).⁹ Leckie's *Open Houses* is split into two sections: the first

⁵ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 241.

⁶ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 16.

⁷ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 17; Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 154.

⁸ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 17-18.

⁹ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 4.

explores the documentary texts of Chadwick's *Report* and Godwin's *Blow* and argues that the exposé model deployed by these texts was intended to help 'describe inadequate housing conditions, tabulate their impact on inhabitants, and call for improved designs'.¹⁰ These texts, drawing on the realist impulses of exposition as well as melodramatic tactics, demonstrate a shifting understanding of architecture in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. Architecture, especially domestic architecture, was increasingly understood to 'have a *productive* dimension', and with it an ability to shape and change social issues.¹¹ As Leckie argues, the exposés of the mid-century saw architecture as capable of curing the soul through a 'sanitary idea' that shaped reform thinking throughout the period.¹²

Leckie's discussion of these exposés provides an important and critical intervention into the development of 'the architectural idea', a term which Leckie defines as an 'approach to the housing of the poor that coupled looking inside the house with uncovering a secret truth and publicizing it as a catalyst for social reform'.¹³ Despite the proliferation of such exposés, according to Leckie, 'housing conditions fail to improve', leading the commentators 'into scepticism' about print's capacity to generate change.¹⁴ The complexity of this concept provides the framework for the remainder of the argument: these exposés depend upon the revelation of a 'secret truth' that emerges from within the houses of the poor to achieve social change, but, despite the proliferation of such expository reports, the conditions did not improve. So, Leckie asks, despite repeated entries into the abject domiciles of the poor, why did social reform fail to materialise?

The second section of the book, which turns to fiction, suggests that social reform failed because of a combination of methodology, media, and social attitudes. If the medical and political reports failed to spark social reform even with their melodramatic tactics, did nineteenth-century novels by Dickens, Eliot, and Henry James fare any better? Certainly, as Leckie shows by building on Raymond Williams's introduction to *Dombey and Son*, these authors were able to interpenetrate the homes

¹⁰ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 11.

¹¹ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 37. Emphasis in original.

¹² Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 31.

¹³ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 33.

¹⁴ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 11.

of the poor in ways that not only reveal the dark interiors but also urged a broader programme of social reform, like the exposés of the mid-century. However, the relationship between exposing the interior space of the impoverished home and the need for housing reform takes on a more complex and spirited approach through its mediation in the nineteenth-century novel, both in the specific novels that Leckie analyses and in the very form of the nineteenth-century novel. In its mediating capacity, the nineteenth-century novel is able to take up 'a reform agenda, a petitioning for social change' that uses 'the darkness, the rats, the death [...] as the beginning and not the end of analysis'.¹⁵

While recovering these medical and political reports is itself of immense value, Leckie's interrogations of specific spaces are exceptional for their interweaving of formalism, mediation, and architectural theory. For example, in her reading of Hablot Knight Browne's 'dark plate' representing Tom-all-Alone's in *Bleak House*, Leckie draws together Benjaminian discussions of the arcade as well as Sigfried Gideon's concept of 'interpenetration' to reveal the ways in which Dickens's representations of the slum 'turns the room inside out' in order to baffle distinction 'between the interior and exterior'.¹⁶ The central displacement of Tom-all-Alone's in *Bleak House* refocuses the scale of poverty in the nineteenth-century novel. While the slum is often relegated to the periphery, its refusal to adhere to proper boundary demarcations, its proliferation, its severity, and the threat it is perceived to pose to the moral nature of the national identity means, as *Open Houses* clearly demonstrates, that poverty was of central importance to the nineteenth-century novel and ought therefore to be of central importance to our *understanding* of the nineteenth-century novel.

Barbara Leckie's *Open Houses* provides not only superb readings of recovered documentary and canonical literary sources, it also provides a model for scholarship rooted in politics. Leckie ends this important and impressive monograph with a call to re-examine our epistemological understanding of housing policies, especially for the poor, precisely because it is an epistemology 'on which it is difficult to found a reliable politics'.¹⁷ Instead of a politics and epistemology of 'exposé', Leckie's study urges

¹⁵ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 12.

¹⁶ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 135; Steven Marcus, 'Homelessness and Dickens', *Social Research*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (1991) 93-106 (p.105).

¹⁷ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 242.

scholars, readers, and reform-minded individuals to 'relax our hold on an epistemological model that seeks to uncover the truth and prise it free from its defining structures.'¹⁸ In so doing, she argues, 'the field will be inspired and animated', but so too will we be able to 'giv[e] shape [...] to how we imagine the future'.¹⁹ If Barbara Leckie's *Open Houses* is a sign of that inspiration, animation, and future, then our field will undoubtedly benefit from this important and impressive work.



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¹⁸ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 243.

¹⁹ Leckie, *Open Houses*, p. 244.