The Unrepresented Reality behind a Fairytale Life – A Look into the Dramatization of Victorian Life with Kathryn Hughes

The complex social dynamics of Victorian culture currently captivate imaginations and dominate television screens across the globe. These shows are period pieces filled with jewel clad monarchs, elegantly dressed ladies, and elaborate decors that reflect wealth and luxury. In their recent review of the “Masterpiece” show, *Victoria, The New York Times* *said*, “Who would have thought that the person for whom the Victorian Era was named would be this much fun?” But as Kathryn Hughes explains in her new book, *Victorians Undone: Tales of the Flesh in the Age of Decorum*, the Victorian Era was not as glamorous and comfortable as shows like *Victoria* would like you to believe and neither was Victoria.

In *Victorians Undone* Kathryn Hughes exposes the harsh reality behind the modern idea of Victorian life. For Hughes, Queen Victoria is not the demure and elegantly clad Jenna Coleman but in fact a young woman struggling with hygiene issues. The book explains that in her early years on the throne Victoria did not bathe or change her clothes often enough and consequently smelled horrible. It wasn’t until Lord Melbourne hinted at bathing more often that Victoria’s physical appearance improved.

For Hughes, exposing the truth about the physical difficulties of Victorian life positively undermines the false narrative circulating through the media. Hughes strives to remind her audience that “the status of these shows is pleasant, escapist fantasy. They are, in fact, fairy tales with lovely Princesses/Peeresses, kind and wise fathers, and rivalrous step-mothers. We have turned the past, especially the Victorian past, into a giant dressing-up box. There’s nothing wrong with that – it’s fun – but it does become dangerous once we start to think that this is how life really was. We take refuge in a slack nostalgia, forgetting that if we were alive 150 years ago, we’d probably be minus teeth, with scarred skin and a perpetual cough that never cleared up and that we would almost certainly smell.”

Finished copies of *Victorians Undone: Tales of the Flesh in the Age of Decorum* are now available. Please expect a copy in the mail shortly. Additionally, Kathryn Hughes will be available for interview during the week of February 4th. Please contact me with any questions.