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BOOK BLITZ: ALL ABOUT FICTION.

Governess Gone Goth

A NEW EDITION OF JANE EYRE REVEALS ITS TRULY
SUBVERSIVE MESSAGE.

By Ann Hulbert

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Judged by its cover, the Viking Studio/Penguin Group's new *The Illustrated Jane Eyre* might well make a grown-up reader bridle: What is this, a great book decked out for the Goth-teen crowd? A hefty paperback with flaps, its demure spine is done up to look just like a scuffed leather-bound first edition, while the campy cover was drawn by underground comic-book artist Dame Darcy, whose neo-Victorian, funky, Addams-family-style creations have won her a cult following. Aiming to make the novel look "really kind of punk rock for

the new generation of goth girls," she picked "the scene where Jane Eyre is freaking out while the giant mansion is burning behind," Darcy explained to an interviewer. In a black cape and hood, her huge eyes heavy with kohl, a pale-faced Jane weeps while orange flames jag upward and blood-red letters spell out the title in the black sky. The back cover, where you might expect some reminder of Brontë, features a sepia photograph of Dame Darcy instead. She poses in the decadently frilly fashions she has made her signature garb.

But since when should a book—especially a book by Charlotte Brontë—be judged by its cover? Brontë's guiding insight into life and literature, to simplify only somewhat, is that surfaces are suspect: Beware of assuming they are a reliable sign of the real passions within. Her own title page in 1847 (a facsimile of which appears in the Viking edition) was purposely misleading: Brontë adopted the male-sounding pseudonym of an editor named "Currer Bell" and presented the novel as an "autobiography." This immediately sparked debate about the real identity of the author. Subsequent biographical treatments of Brontë only added to the gallery of mythic personas. And of course, Brontë's most famous character, the "Quakerish



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governess" Jane, is a prime case of deceptive packaging herself. Out of a "poor, obscure, plain, and little" victim emerges a commanding—and demanding—narrative voice, proclaiming a right to bold self-creation almost as jarring today as it was a century and a half ago. A mistreated orphan at the start, Jane goes on to script her own dramatic fate—and to alter the destiny of her "master," Mr. Rochester, who falls under her spell. In a story tricked out as a melodramatic romance, Jane embodies a force that still deeply discomfits us: a female refusal to be valued as less than an equal, which blossoms into a fierce ambition to make her mark on the world.



For alienated Goth girls drawn to the macabre whimsy of the Dame Darcy edition (which contains 40 illustrations), a surprise therefore awaits. What is spookiest about *Jane Eyre* is not that it taps into fantasies of craggy-featured lovers and ghoulish horrors, but that it endorses desires for creative

dominance, as Jane lights her own way from dependency to heretical authority. By now, the bats-and-bloodstained-petticoats stuff, a staple of dark comics, has minimal power to shock. Even in the staid days when *Jane Eyre* first caused a sensation, parents who hid the book were worried about more than the racy luridness—disturbing though that was. ("The love-scenes," one stunned reviewer wrote, "glow with a fire as fierce as that of Sappho, and somewhat more fuliginous.") It was the bold "I" expressing herself on every page, and the outsized imagination behind it, that had *Jane Eyre's* original audience truly alarmed, as the fevered speculation about the reality behind Currer Bell reveals: Who, reviewers wondered, would dare conjure up a female capable of speaking with such "a clear, distinct, decisive style," such "hardness, coarseness, and freedom of expression," such "power, breadth, and shrewdness"?

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You might think that by now such a declaration of feminine independence would have lost its subversive force. Yet it's precisely that uninhibited voice that still gives *Jane Eyre* its power. I'm not sure the outspoken "I" looms quite so large for adults as for children; on revisiting *Jane Eyre*, an older reader may be distracted by assorted kinky undercurrents his or her 13-year-old self missed completely. But for adolescents approaching the novel as a classic (its days as



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illicit fare are long since over), the immediacy of address is startling. Within the first few pages, Jane the marginalized victim has already begun taking revenge, pinning her brutal aunt and cousins to the page with a merciless ear and eye—"I mused on the disgusting and ugly appearance of him who would presently deal [the blow]." She is the deeply intimidating child on whom nothing is lost.

In an era when everybody—from the Girl Scouts to guidance counselors to the Gossip Girl series—peddles the "you-go-girl" message, *Jane Eyre* is a book that evokes the struggle for self-definition as a truly harrowing one. This isn't a coming-of-age story about absorbing the counsel of wise mentors, overcoming temptation, and thus learning to "be yourself." As Edward Mendelson astutely observes of the novel in *The Things That Matter*, Jane sets about doing something much lonelier and harder. She insists on finding "her beliefs by herself," in her own way, as she weathers exile after exile, first from her past (a hellish home and school) and then from a future that seems, fleetingly, to await her with Rochester. She doesn't come to accept others' values as her own, as the protagonist of the traditional novel of education does. Instead, "[w]hat Jane learns," Mendelson writes, "is not how to act, but how to believe."

Such a quest is a creative ordeal that demands self-reliance and an inner core of confidence to embark on in the first place. I know I'm not alone in having subliminally assumed that *Jane Eyre* was a portrait of the artist as a young woman when I first read it (which I would swear I did huddled, Jane-style, on a window seat behind a curtain—except that my parents' house had no such perch). And when you think about it, I was right. Jane isn't just a frail governess who ends up a wife and mother, happily ever after; she is also a published author, both within the "fiction" of the novel (narrated to us) and as a reflection of its real author, Charlotte. Brontë, remember, called the book an "autobiography" as a ploy to push readers closer to her lowly narrator—but also as a gesture toward the truth. Brontë, who at 20 sent poems to the poet laureate and told him she yearned "to be for ever known," channeled her own unbounded literary ambition into Jane, who refuses to be treated as a marginal figure. In turn, the indomitable Jane has a way of enlisting her readers, especially the adolescents among them, in the dream of being recognized as an assertive original.

"Reader, I married him"—the often cited opening sentence of the novel's conclusion—is a line that has yet to lose its galvanic power. There is, of course, that decisive "I," where you would expect a demurer and more domestic

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"we." But it is Jane's confident invocation of "Reader" there that is truly thrilling. She is claiming the status of a writer—and, more, the authority of someone able to command an attentive audience, not just of intimates. In closing, the former outcast asserts that hers is a voice worthy of being listened to beyond the hearth, a voice that might spur others on to a triumphant path.

Dame Darcy is not the first, nor the last, to heed that voice and fall under the heady spell of Brontë's ambition. Just look at her assuming center stage in that photo on the back cover, and listen to her on her MySpace page, where she rallies her Goth-girl fan base to her latest production: "Calling all Bats! (and fairies, we mustnt forget the light) The Halloween season is drawing nigh and with it comes the Dame Darcy's Bi-Costal tour! Yes! BOTH COASTS of the good Ol' USA. I will be signing my latest graphic novel The Illustrated Jane Eyre, Published by Putnam Penguin." In her own mind, the cult queen of the alt-comics/zine universe has evidently usurped the author's place. It's an act of creative presumption that Brontë—who fought her way up from the fringe herself—would probably forgive, especially if it helps get the book on the bats' radar.

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Ann Hulbert is the author of [Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children](#).

Illustration (top) by Dame Darcy. Image (bottom) from The Illustrated Jane Eyre courtesy Viking Studio/Penguin Group USA.

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