

BOOK REVIEW | NONFICTION

The Private Life of Victorians

By LEAH PRICE DEC. 1, 2016

UNMENTIONABLE

The Victorian Lady's Guide to Sex, Marriage, and Manners

By Therese Oneill

Illustrated. 307 pp. Little, Brown & Company. \$25.

Have you ever dreamed of getting hired as an extra on “Downton Abbey”? Did you grow up coveting the bonnets on “Little House on the Prairie”? Do you fantasize about the good old days when your gentleman caller would have serenaded you instead of sexting you?

Be careful what you wish for, Therese Oneill warns in “Unmentionable.” For starters, you might miss the crotch of your panties: Victorian women’s underwear was slit down the middle, which facilitated peeing but complicated things at that time of the month. You might miss your little pink pill, too, if the alternative was a vaginal suppository designed to kill “germs. And possibly things that rhyme with ‘germ.’”

“Unmentionable” transports us back to the world of middle-class 19th-century women, with special emphasis on the messy details that costume dramas airbrush out. Acting as tour guide to her time-traveling reader, Oneill, a humor writer, tells us what we’ll wear (a lot of layers, none very clean), how we’ll power our vibrators (galvanic batteries) and where we’ll park our excrement (under the bed). With a 4-year-old’s scatological glee, Oneill details the logistics of old-time peeing, pooping, gestating, menstruating and mating — or, as the Victorians termed the carnal act, “jiggery-pokery,” “frickle-frackle,” “rumbusticating” and the “featherbed jig.”

Oneill has dug up some lovely tidbits from the dustbin of history. Particular gems include 19th-century cosmetics catalogs that claim to sell rouge only to professional actors, “in much the same way modern medical marijuana is dispensed only for the treatment of glaucoma.” Oneill draws on the writings of figures like John Harvey Kellogg (the man behind the cornflakes) and “Thomas Hill, a prolific and respected writer of guidebooks on everything from thanking a railway conductor to writing . . . tombstone inscriptions.” “Unmentionable” is lavishly illustrated, too: Oneill has an eye for ludicrous images and a penchant for punny captions. A racy photo of a lady touching her chest, for example, is titled “I’m galvanizing my bosoms so I don’t get breaststysteria!”

Unfortunately, Oneill’s finds are as padded as Victorian buttocks. She addresses her reader as “my sweet friend,” “my darling,” “dear one,” “poor child,” “my fragile flower” and “my little dumpling” and often interrupts her narrative with cutesy asides (“Just a quick reminder, darling”). Her arch tone seems to suggest that the 21st century has figured out everything the naïve Victorians missed. “The Victorian era provided the foundation for social change . . . just the foundation,” she says. Today, “you and I can wear pants. And run for president.” For Oneill, Victorian time travel is a tour of horrors that makes us thankful to come home to tampons and toilets.

She has a point, but does the age of Spanx and Wonderbra really have the right to sneer at the era of the corset and the bustle? On a summer day, does a sweaty polyester thong really chafe less than a cotton bloomer? And in an election cycle that seemed to hinge on how often a candidate compared beauty queens to barnyard animals, can we really cite our “own century’s advanced science and frank acceptance of human sexuality”? The past, L.P. Hartley said, is a foreign

country. For Oneill, it's more like a sideshow.

Leah Price's most recent book is "How to Do Things With Books in Victorian Britain."

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