

BRONTË STUDIES, Vol. 36 No. 3, September 2011

Sloane Hall: a Novel. By Libby Sternberg. 390 pp. Detroit: Gale Cengage Learning. 2010.

\$29.95. ISBN-13: 968-1-59414-917-7

Writer of mysteries for young adults, Libby Sternberg's latest offering, *Sloane Hall: a Novel*, is billed as inspired by *Jane Eyre*, 'an inverted re-telling of the classic Jane Eyre story'. Though not modern by any stretch, set in 1929, it is still modern compared to Charlotte Brontë's original tale and a more contemporary notion of female power. With the Silver Screen era as a backdrop, we are carried off into Sternberg's interpretation of a novel that has shaped the literary appreciation of many a reader.

John Doyle, the Jane Eyre character, is trying to make his way in the film world as an assistant cameraman to friend and mentor Leo Bartenstein. Caught in the moment of transition between the 'silents' and the 'talkies', Doyle is struggling to make his mark despite his youth and a rather sordid past. As a young boy, he was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to eleven years in a boys' detention centre. Doyle had killed his abusive stepfather in an inconsolable fit of rage after he had unleashed his final wave of violence on Doyle's fragile alcoholic mother. Indeed, it was a final unleashing, not only because he died before he could inflict another, but also because Doyle's mother's state of fear led to a heart attack that robbed her of her own life. (Oddly, these tragic circumstances somehow recall Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* more than Jane.)

Canfield Home for Wayward Boys — Jane's Lowood School — was where Doyle served his sentence. It was here that for many years he manoeuvred to survive the abuses of his own Reverend Robert Brocklehurst, Brice Clement. In time, the scandalous behaviour of Clement came to light, and he was replaced by the Reverend Mr Milqueton, Jane's St John Rivers. Milqueton reforms Doyle, makes a man and a gentleman of him, so that when he leaves, he is equipped to make his way in the world. He hooks up with Leo to pursue his dream in the movie industry; it was for this world that he developed a passion after finding solace from abuse in movies when he was a young boy.

A moment of inattention at Leo's side — film inserted into the camera the wrong way — leads to Doyle's demise in Hollywood. He is unceremoniously fired by the film director and, thanks to Leo, lands a job as the chauffeur/mechanic/all-around-fix-it-fellow at the estate of film star Pauline Sloane, *née* Eleanor Brickman. It is with this that Sternberg sets up the final elements for her retelling of *Jane Eyre*. With tension mounting between Pauline and Doyle, a love affair blossoms, and the knowledge of a terrible secret comes to light.

Though Sternberg does rely on the framework of Charlotte Brontë's tale for *Sloane Hall*, it is nevertheless an original story with complex character development. While Doyle's circumstances resemble Jane's in a superficial way, his character is entirely his own with original roots, ideas and personality. His past is developed to the extent that one cannot accuse Sternberg of having borrowed shamelessly; she knows how to develop and tell a story and she does it well. Pauline/Eleanor is an equally well-developed character who relies little on Rochester for her traits and quirks. She shares his penchant for sarcasm and momentary cruelty but is otherwise independent of him. And as for the secret that may destroy them, this reviewer will not reveal it. Bertha Mason's trope is a treasure all your own for the hunting.

Sternberg's novel is a refreshing tale, one that borrows bits and parts from *Jane Eyre*, but that stands squarely on its own.

Deputy Editor/Reviews Editor Carolyne Van Der Meer