George Eliot interrupts herself mid-sentence to ask “— but why always Dorothea?’ hinting at untold stories brewing beneath the surface of Middlemarch. “When everyone is out of town” Henry James discovers the vitality of a London populated with “everyone he doesn’t know”, and finds that “unvisited London is infinite” and strangers an “exhilarating presence” in an all too familiar city. Strangers, as Gage McWeeny reveals in this lively and wide-ranging study, are everywhere in Victorian literature and appear in various guises and degrees of strangeness.

One striking thing about McWeeny’s strangers is just how ordinary they seem. The Comfort of Strangers describes modern society as a place where strangers aren’t disconcerting or shocking but ordinary and everywhere. It charts the development of this social “dark matter” and the myriad ways it has shaped, and been shaped by, literary form.

Early on we are asked, “What does modernity feel like?” McWeeny suggests that the sociological fact and literary representation of strangers in a newly crowded world might throw some light on this knotty question. The stranger becomes both symptom and emblem of a society in the throes of modernization. To pinpoint this uniquely modern species of stranger, McWeeny calls on Zygmunt Bauman who writes that “strangers are not a modern invention — but strangers who remain strangers for a long time to come, even in perpetuity, are”. These aren’t just people we don’t know yet but people we see every day and never know any better.

Camilla Cassidy

Gage McWeeny

The Comfort of Strangers
Social life and literary form
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Faced with striking social changes — London’s population hit one million by 1800 — the nineteenth-century novel became correspondingly populous. Unlike its eighteenth-century predecessor which extolled the virtues of community, faced with this proliferation of people, nineteenth-century fiction became more invested in intimate relationships. As Nancy Armstrong explains, the Victorian novel “abandoned the task of imagining an increasingly democratic nation” and turned instead to the individual. McWeeny, though, makes a convincing case for the “lingering preoccupation” with “collective life” in the figure of the stranger.

But representing strangers in realist novels is, by McWeeny’s terms, an almost impossible task. Realist fiction makes connections and creates sympathy for any stranger who comes within its sights doesn’t stay a stranger for long. McWeeny illustrates this problem with two strikingly similar but significantly different scenes from Dickens’s “Omnibus” in Sketches by Boz is fleeting enough that its not-quite characters remain “passing fragments”. People occupy the same space without paying enough attention to each other that their strangeness evaporates. In Bleak House, Esther Summerson’s encounter with a stranger in a coach seems to be doing something similar until, six years later, she re-emerges as John Jarndyce. The novel — or perhaps just Dickens’s novels — can’t resist the pull of a neatening coincidence. So instead, McWeeny tracks his elusive strangers into the outer edges of literary form — favouring the fleeting, the provincial and the literary critical — as far away as possible from the realist form or urban landscapes with which this book so compellingly begins.

To trace the tangled relationship between a world full of strangers and the literary forms attempting to describe it, McWeeny uses what he calls a “supple” engagement with sociology. Sociology was a term first used in the 1840s but this burgeoning field, in Britain at least, is described here — briefly and disapprovingly — as empirical and hostile to theory. McWeeny’s most striking debts, in fact, are to the 1970s, via Roland Barthes’s The Neutral, Erving Goffman’s “civil inattention” and Mark Granovetter’s theory of weak social ties.

Another strand of the argument scrutinizes assumptions underpinning research and teaching of English in universities. It is “bookended” with chapters — one on Matthew Arnold, the other on James — that trace the connections between “literary form, literary criticism, and sociology”. This triumvirate feels a fairer summary of McWeeny’s approach — a method he is concerned to explain as well as to apply. For instance, we hear about the rationale for combining close and distant reading as a method that takes in sociological “oscillations… between the minimal and the massive”.

This makes it a vibrant contribution to the study of literary form’s entanglements with the methods and concerns of emerging social science; it reveals myriad ways in which we negotiate a society overrun with strangers. It is only slightly marred by a peppering of distorting typos ranging from unimportant slips, such as “an oblique angel”, to obvious but off-putting misinformation, such as a review of Middlemarch dated 1786. McWeeny points to www.undergroundnewyorkpubliclibrary.com’s photographs of people reading on the subway to suggest that this juggling act between distance and proximity remains very much part of everyday life.

And that, one way or another, books still find ways to get in on the act.