



Governess: The Lives and Times of the Real Jane Eyres

Ruth Brandon

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Between the 1780s and the end of the nineteenth century, an army of sad women took up residence in other people's homes, part and yet not part of the family, not servants, yet not equals. To become a governess, observed Jane Austen in *Emma*, was to "retire from all the pleasures of life, of rational intercourse, equal society, peace and hope, to penance and mortification for ever." However, in an ironic paradox, the governess, so marginal to her society, was central to its fiction—partly because governessing was the fate of some exceptionally talented women who later wrote novels based on their experiences. But personal experience was only one source, and writers like Wilkie Collins, William Makepeace Thackeray, Henry James, and Jane Austen all recognized that the governess's solitary figure, adrift in the world, offered more novelistic scope than did the constrained and respectable wife. Ruth Brandon weaves literary and social history with details from the lives of actual governesses, drawn from their letters and journals, to craft a rare portrait of real women whose lives were in stark contrast to the romantic tales of their fictional counterparts. *Governess* will resonate with the many fans of Jane Austen and the Brontës, whose novels continue to inspire films and books, as well as fans of *The Nanny Diaries* and other books that explore the longstanding tension between mothers and the women they hire to raise their children.

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