This is a study of high and low culture in the years before the Reform Act of 1867, which vastly increased the number of voters in Victorian Britain. As many commentators worried about the political consequences of this ‘Leap in the Dark’, authors and artists began to re-evaluate their own role in a democratic society that was also becoming more urban and more anonymous. While some fantasized about ways of capturing and holding the attention of the masses, others preferred to make art and literature more exclusive, to shut out the crowd. One path led to ‘Sensation’, the other to aestheticism, though there were also efforts to evade this opposition. This book examines the fiction, drama, fine art and ephemeral forms of these years against the backdrop of Reform. Authors and artists studied include Wilkie Collins, Dion Boucicault, Charles Dickens, James McNeill Whistler and the popular illustrator Alfred Concanen.

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as ‘background’, feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field. This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

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Image 4 appears courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Image 9 appears courtesy of the Musée D’Orsay.
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This book has changed career a number of times: beginning as a study of women in white, it became for a period a broad and even survey of culture in the 1860s, before assuming its current shape as an account of elite and popular cultural forms in the run-up to the 1867 Reform Act. This final version has been influenced by the thoughtful comments of a number of audiences who listened to excerpts and early avatars of various chapters: at the British Association of Victorian Studies conferences at Keele in 2004 and in Liverpool in 2006; the MLA in Washington, DC, in 2005; the Locating Subjects conference at the University of Calabria in Cosenza in 2005; the Research Seminar for Victorian Literature at Oxford University in 2006; the North American Victorian Studies Association/Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada Conference at Victoria, BC, in 2007 and at Yale in 2008; the Research Seminar series at NUI Maynooth in 2008; and the Performing the Material Text Symposium at Florida State University in 2008, as well as at the Research Seminar Series in the UCD School of English, Drama and Film, where my colleagues have listened tolerantly to versions of at least two chapters. Participants in my ‘Feeling Modern’ MA seminar at UCD also deserve thanks for being the guinea pigs for some of these ideas.

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