Foreword

Nancy Roberts’ study of the role that reading novels can play in the formation of gender positioning, *Schools of Sympathy: Gender and Identification in Novels*, is included in the Academic Women’s Association series because of its original contribution to the field of gender studies. Roberts argues that the process of reading novels helps form gender positioning. The novels function as “schools of sympathy” which teach us, in her words, “to act and feel as gendered subjects” (p. 10). The work is based on Roberts’ doctoral research in the Department of English at the University of British Columbia, for which she won the Academic Women’s Association’s A. Jean Elder prize for the outstanding dissertation in the arts and social sciences completed in 1993.

The Academic Women’s Association at the University of British Columbia promotes exciting new fields of women’s scholarly inquiry by encouraging the publication of research results. *Schools of Sympathy* is the third in the AWA’s book series.

The first volume in the series is a work of history by Lee Stewart, “*It’s Up To You*: Women at UBC in the Early Years” (Vancouver: UBC Press 1990). Based on Stewart’s graduate research at UBC, it was intended as the AWA’s contribution to the university’s seventy-fifth anniversary celebrations. Stewart examines the experience and strategies of female advocates, educators, and students against the background of the social and cultural conditions prior to the revolutionary decade of the 1960s.
The story of this book may not be quite so arresting or moving as
the story of Clarissa Harlowe or Tess Durbeyfield, but I think the
outline of its genesis and its obsessions might be instructive
nonetheless. This is a story about women and reading. As a lifelong
reader of novels, I know how they have shaped and, to some extent,
determined the person I've become.

I was lucky that when I returned to graduate school I found it
convulsed in “theory.” This was a time of great excitement. Most
exciting to me were the connections being made – connections
between and among literature, history, politics, and philosophy.
There was a sense at that time that all we might have taken for
granted was now under question. As a feminist I welcomed this
shaking of the pillars of convention. From all the tumult and con-
fusion of this time I took what I needed for this project. From Fou-
cault I took a way of conceptualizing the social and historical for-
mation of the subject. From film theorists I began to appreciate the
way that narrative and film situate us, “put us in our place” both
in the cinema and in society at large. And from feminism, always,
was the renewed conviction that the personal is political (an out-
look feminism shares with Foucault), a continued questioning of
the status quo, and a way to approach fiction that could show how
much it mattered.

Rereading Clarissa and Tess in preparation for my Ph.D. candi-
dacy exams, I was struck anew by the prolonged misery of these tales. As I read, I felt myself to be in the grip of a voice or narrative that would not let me be, a voice that demanded that I look and keep on looking at the spectacle it provided, a spectacle of what seemed to be infinite female woe. Things were bad for these heroines and they just got worse. Compelled to read and to suffer along with them, I both resented and, in a perverse kind of way, enjoyed the experience. Although I hated reading these books, I could not stop reading them. What was going on? What accounted for my own reaction, and more important, why did I have to read these? Why were these tales of victimization, cruelty, and suffering given such a central place in the canon? It was reactions and questions such as these that provided the genesis of this study.

Since then, this work has taken on a life of its own, bringing me to places, like the world of Angela Carter, that I hadn’t known existed. Places that give me hope for the future.

We have recently passed through a period of social history in which the very word “victim” has grown, at least to some, tiresome and troubling. In the era of identity politics victim status has been claimed, denied, debated, ridiculed, and abandoned by one group after another. It is my hope that by looking at these early and contemporary novels we can begin to see what is being contested, to understand why the figure of victim should be at once so compelling and so problematic.