

Unique in interdisciplinary presentation, scholarly and accessible, the winner of two prizes — a gold medal from the Independent Publisher Book Awards for the Best Mid-West Regional Non-fiction Book and the Distinguished Book Prize from the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln — *Great Plains* poses questions “emblematic of the world at large” (18).

*Voices from the Back Stairs: Interpreting Servants' Lives at Historic House Museums*, by Jennifer Pustz. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010. x, 244 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$27.00 paper.

Reviewer Barbara J. Howe is the former director of the Center for Women's Studies at West Virginia University. She is the author of “The Historic Role of Women in the Nineteenth-Century Historic Preservation Movement,” in *Restoring Women's History through Historic Preservation* (2003).

Who were the servants? What did they do? Where did they live? How did they interact with their employers? These are questions that historic sites, especially historic house museums, across the country should address to provide the most complete interpretation of the lives of all who lived and worked on the premises, but it is easy to make these people invisible because the sites may think they lack relevant artifacts and sources. Jennifer Pustz has drawn on her experiences working at Brucemore in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Historic New England (formerly the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities) to address these questions and to suggest examples and resources for others to use. To add broader context to her own experiences as an employee and visitor at sites, she sent out a survey to 691 historic house museums other than “pioneer homesteads and log cabins,” which would not have had domestic servants, in all but two states and the District of Columbia to ask how they interpreted domestic service. The survey is included as Appendix I. She had a response rate of 53.5 percent (358 surveys) and incorporates some of the examples from the survey in the narrative, including sites in Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Pustz states that her goal is “to help historic house museum staff reach the objective of telling the whole history of their sites through interpretation of domestic servants in a rich and complex fashion that favors the ‘real’ over the ‘ideal’” (12). The first chapter includes some interpretation of the domestic work of enslaved people at sites such as Montpelier and Monticello, but the focus of the book is on the period from 1870 to 1920. Chapter two provides an overview of the results of

Pustz's survey, with comments on interpreting topics such as the race and ethnicity of the servants, their living and working conditions, and "the social stigma of domestic service" (59). Chapter three, "The Ideal, the Real, and the Servant Problem," draws on a variety of contemporary sources, such as women's magazines, household manuals, photographs, and census data, as well as interviews with family members of the home's owners or of the servants, to show how house museums might contextualize the lives of the servants who worked at their sites. Chapter four then shows how museums might use these sources to interpret domestic life through tours of kitchens and servants' bedrooms, for instance, which are often off limits to visitors because they are used as offices or storage space. Here, the author uses Bruce more as a prominent example. The final chapter provides case studies in interpreting domestic service, including the midwestern sites of Bruce more; Villa Louis in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin; and the James J. Hill site in St. Paul, Minnesota. There are also two photo essays — "The Servant Problem Illustrated" and "Contemporary Interpretations of Domestic Service" — and an appendix of additional resources.

Pustz's strongest contribution comes in the last three chapters, where she provides specific resources that might not be familiar to all historic house museum staff and gives specific examples of imaginative ways to talk about servants' lives, including "servants' tours" that use the back stairs so often closed off to visitors. It is easy, for instance, to talk about cleaning methods or meal preparation, but Pustz offers suggestions for talking about the interactions between servants and employers, which are more difficult to unravel. The example of Maymont, in Richmond, Virginia, stands out here because the staff worked closely with the surrounding community to develop an interpretive program focusing on African American servants in the early twentieth century and now "forces" visitors to acknowledge that history because they enter the building through a modified version of the servants' entrance. It is a relief to come to these three chapters after chapter two, as it is hard to make survey results read in an exciting way, and Pustz gives very few specific examples amidst the wealth of data. Finally, it is hard to understand why the publisher used photo essays instead of interspersing the illustrations with the text. Or, at least, it would have been good if readers knew that the illustrations were forthcoming on particular pages so that they could skip ahead to find them when reading the text. Historic house museums often face financial and personnel constraints, but Pustz offers enough ideas that even the most under-resourced site should find something to incorporate into its current interpretation with little extra effort.