

**DAMAGE LIMITATION – by Alan Isaac**

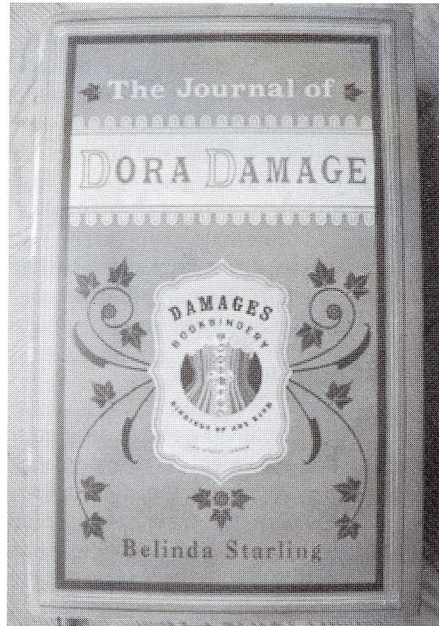
*The Journal of Dora Damage* – Belinda Starling. Bloomsbury. 452pp. 2007  
ISBN 978 0 7475 8522 0 (Hardback). £12.99

Damages, is not the most prepossessing name for a bookbinding firm, but when one bearing it should lose its proprietor and fall into untrained hands, its demise seems all but inevitable. However, the eponymous Dora is one of fates foremost resisters, and it is her defiant spirit, battling seemingly insurmountable odds, which provides the central thrust of this novel.

The tale is set in Early-Victorian London and is peopled by a largely dark and malevolent crop of more, or less, sinister characters – with a minor cast of trustworthy and helpful souls. Damages is a sole-practitioners bindery, run by Peter of the second generation. He suffers increasingly from rheumatism in his hands until the day arrives when he can bind no more. Dora, until now, wife and mother, through necessity has the role of provider forced upon her, debts mounting.

Binding becomes a metaphor for all that connects one person to another, individually or severally. Dora is bound through marriage to Peter, who despite his physical decline is strongly opposed to women working in the trade. Dora has to face up to this and other aspects of her duty to her husband. Driven by the pursuit of binding work, Dora falls into the hands of an unscrupulous band of aristocratic purveyors of illicit erotic literature. Dora remains tied to them, despite the unpleasant nature to her of the work, because of the risk of the forced removal of her daughter, a sufferer of epilepsy. This provides scope for quack theories as to the origin and treatment of the disorder. However, Dora refuses to be uncritically 'bound' by law, convention or personal ties.

How does the novel treat bookbinding? On the whole, very convincingly. What is created is a realistic home workshop, where familiar binding practices are deftly described. However, Dora's overly swift mastery of the art of finishing places some strain on creative licence, as perhaps does her latent skill as a designer of book covers. This aspect, as with the odder and more arcane avenues of Victorian society, are thoroughly researched and skilfully woven into the story – often with unsettlingly conviction. There is a strong undertone of death in the book – represented in particular by a neighbour clad continually in mourning and a shuttle train designated for the removal of the dead from central London to Woking, of all places, the sound of which is intermittently referred to.



What might very easily have become a feminist tract – Dora's independence of spirit inevitable leads her in a championing direction – is intelligent, thought provoking and philosophical, as well as being a 'period' novel, but it is occasionally a troubling read. It confronts challenging topics: possession and release, race and rebellion, freedom and servitude among them, as well as pain and suffering. It is, in short, not a novel with which to whistle and skip amongst the daisies, but having said that, Dora's indomitable spirit may give subtle strength to a reader's ailing binding practice, resolution permitting.

This is the first, and sadly, the last novel of Belinda Starling. She died at the tragically young age of 34, shortly after finishing writing and prior to its publication. A tribute printed after the text, suggests a warm but rather combative and pugnacious character, with more than a little of Dora's life force. If that is the case, then the reader is privileged to have had some vicarious acquaintance with her.