Review: Heartthrobs: A History of Women and Desire, by Carol Dyhouse

May 19th, 2018

Review by Jonathan A. Allan

Carol Dyhouse opens Heartthrobs: A History of Women and Desire with the canonical Freudian question: “What did women want?” (1) The question itself is recorded in Ernest Jones’ biography of Freud. It is reported that Freud told Marie Bonaparte: “The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is ‘What does a woman want?’” (2:421). Freud’s question was governed by a genuine curiosity and a belief that “the psychology of women [is] more enigmatic than that of men” (Jones, 2:421). In many ways, I would think, this question motivates a significant portion of scholarship in popular romance studies— as if scholars imagine that if they can understand the popular romance they can understand women. The question animates so much of what scholars do with popular romance, whether it be to praise or to reject it. As such, it is no surprise that this is where Dyhouse begins her book, Heartthrobs.

Dyhouse’s Heartthrobs is a cultural history that seeks to “look at what women have found irresistibly attractive in men” (1). Certainly, this is a welcome addition to a growing body of scholarship in popular romance studies that has sought to answer this question, most notably, Women Constructing Men: Female Novelists and Their Male Characters edited by Sarah S. G. Frantz and Katharina Rennhak. In Heartthrobs, Dyhouse considers representations of men in popular culture, largely in the twentieth century, so as to explain women’s desires. Dyhouse explains,

The icons of romantic literature—Mr Darcy, Mr Rochester, Heathcliff, or Rhett Butler—were mostly, in the first instance, products of the female imagination. Movie stars and rock musicians acquire and cultivate images that in many cases have little to do with their ‘real’ selves. Many of the most successful ‘romantic leads’ in the past—Montgomery Clift, Rock Hudson, Dirk Bogarde, Richard Chamberlain, for instance—have been gay. Their performances nevertheless conjured visions of maleness which had women weak at the knees: how do we make sense of this? (1)

Dyhouse’s question, like Freud’s, is about understanding women’s desires. What do women want? And, secondly, how do we account for and explain what women want? The challenge with asking questions such as these is that one runs the risk of rendering all women the same, as if all women have the same desires. This critique becomes all the more prescient when we account for and explain what women want? The challenge with asking questions such as these is that one runs the risk of rendering all women the same, as if all women have the same desires. This critique becomes all the more prescient when we imagine that if they can understand the popular romance they can understand women. The question animates so much of what scholars do with popular romance, whether it be to praise or to reject it. As such, it is no surprise that this is where Dyhouse begins her book, Heartthrobs.

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least to some degree, reflected a desire for realism on the part of readers, insofar as the heroine had to be believable. This chapter closes with *The Sheik* by E. M. Hull (1919) and the film adaptation, as well as the first image of Rudolph Valentino, who plays a significant role throughout *Heartthrobs*. For Dyhouse, [End Page 2] "The Sheik was the perfect escape fantasy; book and film between them offered a multifaceted vision of desirable masculinity, both masterful and tender: just about all that the heart could desire" (29).

The next chapter, "Unbridled Passions" explores the idea of "loosing[ing] control" (37), especially in an historical sense, drawing on sources as varied as Franz Liszt (Lisztomania) through to Rudolph Valentino, Rhett Butler, and ultimately fans of the Beatles. This chapter thus provides a cultural overview of the rise of desire. For example, Dyhouse quotes Barbara Ehrenreich who argued that "Beatlemania' constituted a huge outpouring of teenage female libido' which we might see as having represented an opening salvo in the sexual revolution" (51). This is an interesting perspective because it works to reframe some of the historical discussions of the sexual revolution and squarely places teenagers at the center of it, rather than say, the sexologists who exposed the kinds of sex unfolding in bedrooms across the nation.

The following chapter focuses on the packaging of the male body, which reminds us, that "many of the iconic romantic heroes in literature were dreamt up by women" (52). In many ways this claim, and this chapter in particular, lies at the heart of *Heartthrobs*. Put another way, why is Mr. Darcy so iconic? Why does Mr. Darcy "loom large as an archetype, one of the most powerfully attractive fantasy males in literature, who has inspired countless imitations" (52)? In this chapter, Dyhouse covers everyone from Mr. Darcy to Fabio, and along the way we are reacquainted with Valentino, and introduced to Elvis Presley, David Essex, Paul Anka, and so many others. In this chapter, then, the image of the man, the iconic male, becomes increasingly interesting to Dyhouse. How are we to think through masculinity as represented upon and through the body? But, even though "perfumes, bodies, clothes and imagined lifestyles carry complex cultural meanings," it must be admitted that "for many women, these on their own haven't been enough to fuel fantasies, dreams, and desires: they have needed to imagine a story" (71).

The fourth chapter, "Once upon a dream: Prince Charming, Cavaliers, Regency Beaux," turns our attention to the fairy-tale hero, Prince Charming, who "in a young girl's imagination [...] represented looks, class, and valour" (73). In this chapter, we learn that "hero worship was part of the [Victorian] culture, and thought to be improving, because it might inspire emulation. Girls couldn't aspire to be great men, of course, but heroes could still be venerated as masculine ideals, and potential husbands measured against their stature" (73). In this rendering, who could ever achieve the ideal? Included in this chapter is discussion of Georgette Heyer's heroes, all of whom follow a formula. She herself referred to them as falling into one of two categories; they were either 'Mark I' or 'Mark II' heroes. The first she defined as the 'brusque, savage sort with a foul temper'; the second tended to be suave, well-dressed, and rich. (81)

One of the most fascinating aspects of this chapter is its consideration of Liberace, a figure who has received renewed scholarly interest; for instance, he is a key figure in Harry Thomas's *Sassy!: The Effeminate Paradox in Postwar US Literature and Culture*. Dyhouse's chapter considers Liberace alongside Barbara Cartland, who was seemingly as flamboyant as Liberace: "Liberace, in his performance, and Cartland, in her romance, busied themselves in highly gendered representations that were oddly devoid of sexuality" (93). This aspect of the chapter is highly interesting and worthy of further consideration.

The following chapter, "Dark Princes, Foreign Powers: Desert Lovers, Outsiders, and Vampires," continues our exploration of the princely figure, the iconic male hero, but in this chapter, we move beyond the persistent whiteness of the romantic hero. However, the author notes,

> Fantasies around dark-skinned exotic lovers on the cinema screen or in romance fiction had their limits, not least because they were generally imagined as appealing mainly to white women; in Western culture, black or non-white women as sexual subjects rarely got a look in [...]. Harlequin Enterprises set up Kimani Press in 2005, to feature ‘sophisticated, soulful and sensual African American and multicultural heroes and heroines,’ with a first launch of Kimani romances in 2006. (111)

Over the course of the chapter, readers learn of the "threatening" (112) nature of race. This chapter reminds us of the complicated history of the popular romance when it comes to dealing with diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism. The chapter closes, oddly perhaps, with a brief analysis of the rise of the vampire romance, which, perhaps more than any other, reaffirms whiteness, but now, in the case of *Twilight*, it sparkles.

The next chapter, "Soulmates: Intimacy, Integrity, and Trust" returns us to the seemingly romantic ideals of chivalry. In this chapter, we find discussions of medical and hospital romances that are quite helpful for scholars of popular romance. Dyhouse notes: "Doctors came to occupy a prominent place in twentieth-century romance" (130). For Dyhouse these romances mark a shift towards the intimate. She explains:

> For a woman writer of romance, a hero is someone much more ordinary, who, once committed to the heroine, gives shape to her life and makes it meaningful. Her quest is to find a man whom she can marry, and who will make her life imaginable. (143-144)

In this rendering, we see a shift towards the idea of the "soulmate," which embodies, perhaps, the most romantic of ideals.

The penultimate chapter, "Power: Protection, Transformative Magic, and Patriarchy" thinks through the challenge of power and patriarchy. If we return to Freud's question that opened this book, "What did women want?" (1), one is tempted to ask if it was patriarchy after all, or at least, "the lure of patriarchy" (149). Dyhouse provides at least one explanation for this, noting, "Attachment to a rich and powerful man could offer protection to women. It might seem to offer the promise of life transformed: comfort, luxury, new horizons, and a new social order. The dominating importance of marriage in romance fiction is bound up with the promise of transformation. The heroine's life is brightened and settled by it—at least in her dreams" (149). One can almost imagine Germaine Greer's oft-cited remark about "cherishing the chains of her bondage" (202). In the novels of Heyer, for instance, readers find [End Page 4]
an affectionate picture of both masculinity and patriarchy: brothers are good-hearted fun to be with, uncles are kind, and heroes, of course, are paragons or enlightened despots. You do get the odd villain, like the Compte de Saint-Vire, but the decent fellows make short work of them. The injuries of patriarchy—girl children unable to inherit, sexual double standards, and the constraints of femininity—are brushed aside, ignored, or quickly forgotten. (151)

Patriarchy and power remain interesting and important in the romance.

In this chapter, we also see “a new trend from the 1960s onwards towards explicitness in writing about sexuality” (153). Dyhouse ties this to the landmark text, Our Bodies, Ourselves, published in 1971, as well as Alex Comfort’s The Joy of Sex, published in 1972. On this point, it seems that there is much to be gleaned for romance scholars: what was/is the role of the sex manual in the study of popular romance? After all, Comfort’s The Joy of Sex was a best-seller. To be certain, Dyhouse rightly critiques The Joy of Sex for some of its less savory elements, noting, “the book contained quite a lot that made women uneasy. The vagina, for instance, is described as looking scary to men” (153). In the words of Ariel Levy, The Joy of Sex was “a penis propaganda pamphlet” (qtd. in Dyhouse 153). Even so, in these years we see a specific and explicit interest in sexuality as more than a theoretical interest, but as a quotidian practice of women: “the lid had come off Pandora’s box” (154).

Finally, Dyhouse explores the anxieties of feminists surrounding the popular romance novel in this chapter. Dyhouse explains that “since the 1970s, fantasy scenarios where heroes ‘overcome’ women’s resistance have raised anxieties about ‘rape’ for feminists” (159) and further explains, “to understand ‘rape fantasies’ in novels for and by women in the 1960s and 1970s the cultural historian needs to look closely at the writing. Books by women tended to invest the male hero with dominance and represent women as relatively passive because this accorded with the gendered expectations of the time” (159). We are told that by the 1990s, “The image of girls as powerless and hopelessly frail had been eroded by popular cultural representations such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer” (162). In many ways, this chapter is the densest and most theoretically interesting, however, it moves quickly, perhaps too quickly. An entire book could be written on the three themes that appear throughout this chapter alone.

The final chapter, “Sighing for the Moon?” asks, “what does it mean to dream of a lover?” (167). Such a question shifts away from the contents of the dream and more towards the action of dreaming; we are reminded that “Victorian girls were regularly upbraided for daydreaming, for being fanciful, for losing themselves in the world of their imaginations. This was nothing new” (167). One cannot help but think of yet another Freudian intervention here—Freud’s essay, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming”: maybe it’s just me, but Freud lurks in the shadows of so much of Heartthrobs. Perhaps Freud is a heartthrob in that he has captured our attention and his questions have continued and will continue to provoke discussion for decades to come.

In this final chapter, we are also treated to a review of the state of scholarship on the popular romance, which points towards its future.

By the end of the century, the world of the romantic novel had been completely transformed by the internet and growth of the World Wide Web. A growing number of websites now allow women to share views on the writing and [End Page 5] reading of romance. Examples include: http://teachmetonight.blogspot.co.uk, ‘Musings on romance fiction from an academic perspective’; http://romancenovelsforfeminists.blogspot.co.uk, http://smartbitchestrashybooks.com, and several more. There are also specialist journals such as the Journal of Popular Romance Studies. (179)

A welcome recognition, to be certain, of the growing field of popular romance studies, that recognizes that the field is active not just in the hallowed halls of the academy, but also the internet. By the close of Heartthrobs, we are presented with a hopeful vision of the future of popular romance fiction:

Maybe we can look forward now to a future in which men and women see each other less as gendered objects onto which they project their own desires and longings, and instead, strive to relate to each other respectfully, as individuals and human beings. (191)

A hopeful vision to be certain, but one that speaks to its own absences. How do scholars account for the rise of the queer heartthrob in popular romance fiction? Dyhouse began by noting that many of the early heartthrobs, it turned out, were gay. But what then of the rise of the male/male popular romance novel? Perhaps nowhere is masculinity more on display than in the male/male popular romance novel. Secondly, I am surprised at how little scholarship on masculinity was consulted or engaged with over the course of Heartthrobs. Dyhouse, in the last paragraph, mentions “hegemonic masculinities—or femininities—may be harder to sustain than in the past” (191), but we are provided no “proof” of this, nor are we treated to any lengthy discussion of Connell’s theoretically rich concept.

Heartthrobs is a useful addition to a growing body of scholarship on the popular romance novel, and more particularly the hero of the popular romance novel. Hopefully, this book will spur future discussions of the popular romance novel and its hero. Still remaining to be written is a history of the alpha male hero. Nonetheless, Heartthrobs will be valuable to students of the popular romance novel in particular.

Works Cited


Review: Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?, edited by William A. Gleason and Eric Murphy Selinger

May 19th, 2018 | Review by Victoria Kennedy

William A. Gleason and Eric Murphy Selinger’s collection Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom? came out of a 2009 conference at Princeton. The title of the collection (and of the conference) comes from bell hooks’ “Love as the Practice of Freedom” (1994). In her essay, hooks argues that “the moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others” (298). Romance Fiction and American Culture takes up this argument to interrogate whether and how this freedom through love can be seen in the creation and consumption of romance narratives in American culture. The collection consists of twenty essays and is divided into four parts: (i) Popular Romance and American History, (ii) Romance and Race, (iii) Art and Commerce, and (iv) Happy Endings.

The book promises to consider romance narratives in a specifically American cultural context from the late eighteenth century to the early twenty-first century. While I question the extent to which the collection achieves its goal of situating romance criticism in an American context, the essays Gleason and Selinger have selected are diverse in a way that is both refreshing and invigorating in romancing studies. Topics explored include: transatlantic romance reading; lesbian romance fiction; black romances; romance in the context of HIV/AIDS; erotica; Orientalism; romance cover art; Christian and Evangelical romance; BDSM; queer romance; and polyamory. The editors stake the originality of the collection on three areas: its national focus on romance and American cultural history, its consideration “at length” (3) of race and romance in six out of the twenty essays, and its exploration of the often overlooked topic of “business” in romance—both as a theme of romance novels and as the business of selling romance novels.

Noting the ways in which critics like Pamela Regis and Catherine Roach have defined the genre in terms of essential components—the foremost of which is the happy ending—Gleason and Selinger open their collection by observing that “there is nothing eternal, universal, or inevitable about the idea that the ‘romance novel’ is or should be a distinct, readily definable genre” (8). While Regis’ Natural History of the Romance (2003) proposes defining the romance novel so rigidly that Rebecca (du Maurier, 1938) and Gone with the Wind (Mitchell, 1936) could not be called romance novels (Regis 48), Gleason and Selinger point to the fact that the British Romantic Novelist’s Association takes a wider view of the romance novel, considering Mills & Boon novels alongside Russian classics like Anna Karenina (Gleason and Selinger 8)—which, notably, does not adhere to the Happily Ever After (HEA) rule that Regis regards as essential to the definition of the romance novel. Gleason and Selinger’s ruminations on how to define the romance novel, however, are anything but pedantic. By challenging existing critical frameworks for classifying and defining romance fiction, they pave the way to consider romance narratives that have previously been given much attention within the critical discourse surrounding the romance novel.

By adhering to strict definitions of the genre—literally checking off whether the “essential” components are present—critics like Regis and Roach have, perhaps unwittingly, excluded many queer and all polyamorous romance narratives from their considerations of the romance genre. By opening up their definition of romance, Gleason and Selinger thus make space for previously excluded texts. Romance Fiction and American Culture is also acutely aware that genres evolve and that consequently “the romance novel” cannot always be defined and classified according to rigid criteria because of the way genres change and blend with one another (think, for instance, of Diana Gabaldon’s Outlander (1991), which blends romance with historical drama and time-travel fantasy—and breaks many of the “rules” of the traditional romance novel).

The collection is positioned as spearheading a “third wave of romance criticism” (10). Gleason and Selinger characterize the previous waves as being concerned first with “texts, readers, and publishing trends with little attention to romance novelists as theorists of, or deliberate artists within, their chosen genre” (11) and secondly as novelists “writing back” (13). The third wave that Romance Fiction and American Culture works towards is characterized by a blurring of roles, bringing together critics, authors, editors, professors, and publishers—many of whom occupy several positions within literary culture, like contributor Len Barot: novelist, editor, reviewer, publisher, and theorist. By recognizing the fluidity of positions writers take up with regard to romance narratives, Gleason and Selinger propose to propel the discourse forward into new territory. One area not thoroughly covered by the collection but signalled in the introduction as a topic for future investigation is the romance blog/review site where academic and non-academic discourses on romance novels often intermingle.

The essays that make up this collection are welcome not only for their thematic range but also for their self-reflexive considerations of romance publishing and romance scholarship. In “Postbellum, Pre-Harlequin: American Romance Publishing in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century,” William Gleason discusses the way digital archives have a crucial role in making available sources that allow us a fuller picture of late nineteenth-century literary culture in America. He calls for such digital archives to include sources often discounted, such as dime novels and romance weeklies. Near the end of the collection, Len Barot’s “Queer Romance in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century America: Snapshots of a Revolution” points out the importance of queer publishers to the availability of queer texts, demonstrating that queer visibility in literature first requires social visibility and freedom for queer people. The Internet, in particular, is considered key to the availability of queer texts, since online book retailers have “made it possible for readers worldwide to access queer titles” (398). Moreover, in the collection’s final chapter, Ann Herendeen, the author of Phyllida and the Brotherhood of Philander, discusses the context in which the author wrote the ‘bisexual Regency romance’ in 2004, her desire to create “a revolutionary work of (genre) fiction, and the reactions to the novel. In addition to extending Barot’s emphasis on the difficulty getting queer texts published by traditional, mainstream presses, Herendeen’s essay invites consideration of the divide between books that are shelved as “literature” and books that are shelved as “romance” within bookstores.

The consideration of romance in the context of racial social politics is a highlight of the collection, even if the racial contexts examined are somewhat limited. Several essays consider how romance narratives about African Americans have to contend...
with “the stereotype of the oversexed black woman” (178). For instance, Consuela Francis’s “Flipping the Script: Romancing Zane’s Urban Erotica” argues that a mononymous author Zane’s Addicted (1998) contains a plot “rarely seen before in contemporary African American literary fiction”—the story of a black woman’s successful search for an emotionally satisfying sexual relationship” (169; emphasis mine). Similarly, Julie E. Moody-Freeman’s “Scripting Black Love in the 1990s: Pleasure, Respectability, and Responsibility in an Era of HIV/AIDS” reads Brenda Jackson’s Tonight and Forever (1995) as a didactic project, teaching safe sex to her readers and offering a counter-image to the “stereotypes of blacks as hypersexual, irresponsible, and deviant” (112). Perhaps the most striking consideration of race in American romance is Catherine Roach’s analysis of Beverly Jenkins’ Indigo (1996) in her essay “Love as the Practice of Bondage.” Here, Roach puts romance, African American history, and the question of freedom centre stage, since Indigo is the story of a man “literally giving himself into slavery in order to be with the woman he loves” (370). In a different racial context, Hsu-Ming Teo, who has published extensively about Orientalism, contributes a chapter in which she argues that Orientalist romance narratives of the 1980s and 1990s contributed to the discourse of America’s “War on Terror.”

Still, despite many strengths, the collection also features some essays that fall somewhat short of the promises made by the collection’s introduction. For instance, Sarah Frantz Lyons and Eric Murphy Selinger’s “Strange Stirrings, Strange Yearnings: The Flame and the Flower, Sweet Savage Love, and the Lost Diversities of Blockbuster Historical Romance” aims to exemplify the collection’s “third wave” critical stance, blurring the distinctions between author, critic, and theorist. Opening with a reading of The Flame and the Flower that notes linguistic echoes of The Feminine Mystique, the authors argue that “it is long past time for scholars of popular romance fiction, and of American culture more generally, to take seriously the work of Kathleen Woodiwiss and Rosemary Rogers and the other original “Avon Ladies” … and to read their novels as situated within and responding to the same historical moment as foundational feminist thinkers” like Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and others. Yet, this methodology is not carried throughout the chapter. The bulk of the chapter considers the way The Flame and the Flower and Sweet Savage Love represent rape, but with little reference to the “foundational feminist thinkers” previously mentioned. It would have been interesting to put the consideration of rape in these female-authored romances against, say, Kate Millett’s analysis of coitus and sexual violence in male-authored novels in the opening section of Sexual Politics. There are also a few essays that seem out of place in a collection almost exclusively focused on romancefiction, such as Rebecca Peabody’s “Kara Walker: American Romance in Black and White,” which considers Walker’s silhouette art installation, and Amelia Serafine’s “‘He Filled My Heart with Doubt’: The Southern Belle’s Love and Duty in the Civil War” which examines the diaries, journals, and letters of Southern women who lived during the Civil War. [End Page 3]

If there is a flaw in the collection, it is that America and American culture seem to be afterthoughts in at least a quarter of the essays. Instead, they present reflections that could just as easily be about romance narratives in any national context. Most curiously, some of the essays are explicitly about other nations’ publishing industries. Jayashree Kamble’s “Branding a Genre: A Brief Transatlantic History of Romance Novel Cover Art” focuses on the merger of Mills & Boon (a British company) and Harlequin (a Canadian company). The essay is positioned as being about American romances because Harlequin “sold its reprints across the United States in increasing volume, and its influence on American romance fiction is immense, which even now leads to the impression that Harlequin is an American company” (251). I find this claim that Harlequin may as well be American to be strangely superficial, ignoring socio-political and ideological differences that exist between the United States and Canada when it comes to the subjects of romance and sexuality. In a similar vein to Kamble’s essay, Jessica Taylor’s “Love the Market: Discourses of Passion and Professionalism in Romance Writing Communities” features a section titled “Romance Writing in Canada” where she draws on “a larger project on the romance writing and publishing community in a major Canadian city” (277). One wonders at the inclusion of such essays in a collection that aims to rectify the absence of “detailed coverage of the American tradition” (3). Thus, as a collection of essays on romance narratives and social politics in general, this collection is a most welcome addition. However, in terms of considering romance narratives in the national context of the Land of the Free, much more theoretical and critical work is still needed.

Works Cited


In terms of their status in the academy, some parallels may be immediately apparent from Nicola McDonald’s observations about the attitude towards Middle English romance in university English departments. In *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance* (1999), she notes that the desire to write “real” sheikh heroes has led to the creation of “pseudo-sheikh” novels, which involve the hero being a Western man posing as Eastern (31). It may seem ironic that the desire to write “real” sheikh heroes should lead to the creation of novels that are anything but real, but this is precisely what makes them so appealing to readers. The “pseudo-sheikh” was a “notable feature of early sheikh romances” and involved the hero being “a Western man posing as Eastern” (33). Although all of the sheikh romances Burge examines in detail have fictional settings this has not always been the case: “an imaginative blend of fantasy and observed reality” (14). In relation to the medieval romance genre, she notes that both medieval and modern romances engage in the “construction of a fictional geography.”

More significant in the contemporary political climate, though, is the fact that “sheikh romance forges a provocative connection with Middle English romance in its use of neomedievalist rhetoric that identifies the contemporary East as ‘medieval’, meaning primitive and barbaric” (1). As Burge explores the similarities between medieval and modern romance, she also explores and questions the apparent differences between medieval and modern, East and West, Saracen and Christian, masculine and feminine.

Burge discusses her choice of primary texts in Chapter 1. Of the approximately one hundred and twenty surviving Middle English romances, she identified forty-two […] that refer to Saracens or the East” (23), all of which are listed in an appendix. Of these, fourteen depict “romantic encounters between Christians and Saracens […]”, although the relationship forms a significant part of the plot in only four of the romances that are the focus of this book” (24): *Bevis of Hampton* (c. 1300); *Floris and Blancheflour* (c. 1250); *The King of Tars* (c. 1300); *Octavian* (c. 1350). Burge compares and contrasts these with a selection of Harlequin Mills & Boon romances published in Britain […] first, given my parallel consideration of Middle English texts that were also produced in England (albeit a radically different one), it made sense to draw my modern romance sources from a parallel English or British space. Second, by focusing on romance novels drawn from a nationally specific cultural context, I am able to explore some aspects of British cultural understandings of the Eastern world. (28)

This contrasts with Jarmakani’s focus, which is very much on the USA. An appendix provides “as complete a list as possible of sheikh romances published by Mills & Boon in Britain” (29) between 1909 and 2009. Of these three hundred titles over half date from the period 2000-2009, and the nine texts chosen for closer analysis are drawn from this sub-sample: Lynne Graham’s *The Arabian Mistress* (2001); Jane Porter’s *The Sultan’s Bought Bride* (2004) and *The Sheikh’s Disobedient Bride* (2006); Penny Jordan’s *Possessed by the Sheikh* (2005); Sarah Morgan’s *The Sultan’s Virgin Bride* (2006); Annie West’s *The Sheikh’s Ransomed Bride* (2007); Chantelle Shaw’s *At The Sheikh’s Bidding* (2008); Trish Morey’s *The Sheikh’s Convenient Virgin* (2008); Sabrina Phillips’ *The Desert King’s Bejewelled Bride* (2009). However, although Burge describes these romances as published “in Britain”, as part of the Mills & Boon Modern Romance line, they were also all published in North America, where the line is known as “Harlequin Presents”. Although Burge notes in Chapter 2 that more than half of the sheikh novels published in Mills & Boon’s Modern Romance line in the 2000s were written by British authors, it should be noted that the authors of novels selected for closer study do not all identify as British: Lynne Graham describes herself as “Irish”; Jane Porter was born and raised in California until she was thirteen, and although she “spent much of my high school and college years abroad” it was in a range of different countries; Annie West and Trish Morey are Australian. While the line is edited in the UK and it can perhaps be assumed that the editors of the novels were, therefore, all British, it is not clear why, with such a large sample to choose from, and with a desire to focus on British texts, Burge did not ensure that all the Mills & Boon romances she selected for more detailed analysis were written by British authors. Perhaps it was due to a belief that even when written by non-British authors, the “romance East […] remains rooted in a real British history in the Gulf, reflected in the dominance of British authors and characters” (61)

Certainly in Chapter 2 Burge argues that the fictional settings of sheikh romances are “modeled on the specific geography of Western-friendly nations in the Middle East, specifically the UAE” (57), which indicates “a lingering British political and diplomatic influence in these globally consumed and produced popular romance novels” (59) given the UAE’s many ties to the UK. While medieval Christendom and the modern West “do not […] map directly onto each other” (14), Burge suggests that both medieval and modern romances engage in the “construction of a fictional romance East” (14) which is “an imaginative blend of fantasy and observed reality” (14). In relation to the medieval romance *Bevis*, therefore, Burge argues that although “the geography of medieval romance has been assumed to function as little more than a fantasy backdrop” (34), *Bevis’s* “focus on routes, specific historical places, and journey details […] create authenticity: the impression that this could be a description of an actual journey” (39).

Although all of the sheikh romances Burge examines in detail have fictional settings this has not always been the case: When Mills & Boon first started publishing sheikh romances, in the first half of the twentieth century, they were almost exclusively set in real locations, such as Algiers, Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia. Indeed, accuracy, or at least a sense of “authenticity,” was central to the sheikh romances of the early twentieth century, and in Britain in particular, geopolitical realities continued to feature in sheikh romances of the 1970s and 1980s […] – it was only in the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of the sheikh (rather than the desert or pseudo-sheikh) romance that the settings of sheikh romances became routinely fictionalized. (56)

The “pseudo-sheikh” was a “notable feature of early sheikh romances” and involved the hero being “a Western man posing as a sheikh” (31). Burge defines “desert” romances as ones “set in the East but with two Western protagonists, neither of whom pose as Eastern” (31). It may seem ironic that the desire to write ‘real’ sheikh heroes should lead to the creation of
realistic but romance scholars may wish to note that this is not a feature unique to sheikh romances: although aristocratic protagonists up to the rank of duke are often given fictional titles within a real kingdom, it is common for heroes who are members of royal families to hail from imaginary states. The one counter-example I have encountered, Rebecca Winters’s *Matrimony With His Majesty* (2007), in which the hero is “king of the Romancé-speaking Vallered Canton in Switzerland” (7), may serve as a ghastly warning of the pitfalls facing an author who hopes to combine an imaginary dynasty with a real geographic location which has a pre-existing political history: given that Switzerland is a federal republic, the constitutional arrangements of this Swiss canton are deeply incongruous.

In Chapter 3 Burge examines the ways in which “medieval and modern romances uphold what they construct as normative, binary gender identities while revealing how the performance of a nonnormative gender identity can temporarily subvert the romance’s framework of gender difference” (9). In the medieval *Floris* it is not the hero who embodies “typical romance masculinity” (72): it is, rather, the Emir of Babylon who “wields a sword as a symbol of violent masculinity” (72) and houses a harem in a “phallic tower” (73). Floris, the hero, “has been widely recognized as displaying a gender identity much closer to the Orientalist stereotype of feminized, or hypomasculinity” (73). While his “weeping, swooning, and being compared with a flower do not, in medieval literature, connote feminine in themselves” (73) Burge suggests that there are “similarities between Floris’s gender performance and that of eunuchs” (75) and argues that “Floris’s performance of eunuch masculinity is transgressive because it severs the links between sex, gender, and desire that maintain compulsory heterosexuality” (78) but,

Paradoxically, [..] restores normative, Christian gender relations. As a consequence of Floris’s transgression with Blancheflour [..] at the end of the romance [..] both Floris and the Emir are drawn into the role of husband: a masculine identity in accordance with a heterosexual gender framework. (79)

Hints of a similar paradox can be found in sheikh romances: “the harem and the Orientalist labeling of Eastern men as animalistic [..] are used to uphold the sheikh’s alpha masculinity” (81) but there is often a suggestion, albeit one which is quickly rejected, that “Eastern robes can conceal or obscure heteronormative masculinity” (83).

Unlike in *Floris*, in the sheikh romance it is the heroine who undergoes a transformation in her gender performance. Burge argues that, at least initially, Western romance heroines often resist the hyperfemininity embodied by the women who “represent two discrete models of Eastern femininity: the virginal, submissive servant/guide, and the sexualized rival” (85). Nonetheless, these models are drawn on by the Western heroine as she undergoes a “process of feminization that occurs uniquely in the romance East” (85). Burge argues that the Western heroine remains special, however, because “it is not Eastern femininity itself that the sheikh desires, but the performance of an Eastern-inflected hyperfemininity by a Western heroine” (88). This not infrequently involves the heroine being a virgin (as she is in at least 32 of the 57 sheikh romances Burge identified in the *Modern* line of Harlequin Mills & Boons); “virginity is the only aspect of sexuality that is specifically labeled as medieval in any way” (92), which is perhaps not wholly unjustified given that in the medieval romances “a similar prominence is given to virginity” (93). [End Page 4]

Chapter 4, on “representing difference, fabricating sameness” (103), places fabric at the centre of the discussion by demonstrating the role played by clothing in expressing ethnicity, femininity, masculinity, and religious identity. Burge finds that in sheikh romances fabric is often “at the very heart of traditional Eastern culture, working as a signifier for it and for the sheikh hero” (115) while the “Western heroine’s ethnicity is also revealed and [..] transformed by the clothing she wears” (116). The importance of fabric in these texts explains why it appears

in the form of carpets, cushions, clothing, or bed sheets in almost every cover image since 2005 [..] as a signifier of the East in modern sheikh romance, following the long tradition of European Orientalist art. (113)

Clothing also expressed ethnicity, religious identity and social status in medieval romance, because the “use of clothing to mark religious identity was an established practice in the Middle Ages encoded in […] legal regulation of Saracens and Jews” (122) and “sumptuary laws were introduced […] and permitted certain clothing, such as silk and furs to be worn only by those of a particular rank to alleviate the fear of people dressing above their social station” (123). Thus although “no Middle English romance overtly refers to such regulations, the association of certain types of clothing with particular qualities is evident” (123). In both medieval and modern romance, then, it should definitely not be assumed that detailed descriptions of clothing and fabric are the “filler” (249) which Ann Bar Snitow dubbed them.

Burge observes that the sheikh is different, but not too different from the Western heroine, thanks to one or more of an education at a Western institution, often Oxbridge or Harvard; a Western ancestry, usually via a mother, grandmother, or great-grandmother; atheism, or a distinctly relaxed attitude toward or nonadherence to Islam; a progressive outlook regarding the social and political values of his desert nation; a jet-setting lifestyle, either residing in or frequently visiting the West; an almost accentless fluency in English; and an ease in both Western clothing and traditional Middle Eastern garb. (105)

One of the “few occasions in sheikh romance where there is an explicit desire for ethnic difference” (106) is in the “eroticizing [of] the contrast between the sheikh’s dark skin and the heroine’s paler complexion” (105), and even this is made much less apparent in the cover art, which seems to “whiten the hero, reducing the visible contrast between the couple” (106). Burge asks if this is “perhaps an example of a disjunction between what can be expressed in writing and what is acceptable to display visually” (107) and suggests that the disjunction could be due to the perception that “Marketing a romance novel with a Middle Eastern hero at a time of political instability and Western military engagement in the region could be seen as provocative” (107). Another explanation may emerge via a reading of Stephanie Burley’s work on “the racial politics of category romance” (324), in which she observes that, in the category romance’s “standard description of the ‘tall, dark, and handsome’ hero, in distinction to the seemingly paler heroine, […] darkness symbolizes the hero’s danger, mystery, sensuality, and otherness. This formula is relatively common” [End Page 5] (328). In other words, a color contrast between a dark hero and a whiter heroine is not exclusive to either sheikh romances or situations involving ethnic or racial difference between the protagonists and therefore for a frequent reader of category romances words highlighting a color contrast between the protagonists will perhaps primarily evoke ideas relating to the erotic potential of differences between the sexes whereas visual images highlighting that same color contrast might be more likely to be interpreted non-metaphorically as a indication of racial/ethnic difference. Furthermore, Burley argues that “the [white] contemporary romance
heroes, who are imagined in terms of literary blackness and who are desirable for their limited associations with otherness, are able to cast off the mantle of darkness when they fall in love with white, innocent heroines” (332). Limiting the sheikh’s “darkness” to the verbal sphere perhaps makes it easier for a similar transformation to occur for him. It is striking that the Saracen Sultan in the medieval romance The King of Tars literally casts off darkness when he adopts the religion of his heroine: upon baptism his skin miraculously changes color from black to white, reinforcing “the association of whiteness with Christianity” (112).

In the modern sheikh romance “religion is subsumed into culture and ethnicity stands as the main difference between East and West” (103) whereas “in the Middle Ages, religion was the operative category of difference, with the binary opposition between Christianity and Islam (and Judaism) structuring identity” (2). Nonetheless, in a move which is perhaps not entirely dissimilar to the religious and color transformation at the end of The King of Tars, the sheikh’s Western heroine often has a “scheme of modernization” (67) with a “focus on women’s rights” (67) and it seems to me that this, too, is often set in motion in earnest towards the end of the sheikh romance. Moreover, such a “scheme of modernization” cannot be considered entirely without a religious element given that the West connects “medieval repression with Islam” (62) and “it is specifically the religious aspects of the region, represented in practices of veiling […] and the treatment of women, which are seen as medieval” (63). Therefore, as Burge later concludes, “The religious roots underpinning these popular texts and, by extension, our popular views of the Middle East are thus exposed: religion remains firmly part of the story” (181).

Burge states that her “book argues that romance manipulates its hybrid representations of religious and ethnic difference in order to create successful romantic unions” (7). In her final chapter she seeks to demonstrate this via an examination of abductions which, she argues, are evidence of the “difference imagined between East and West, Saracen and Christian, which has to be transformed into something acceptable: sameness” (175). Abductions are frequently to be found in both the medieval and modern romances:

Of the fifty-seven sheikh titles in the Modern Romance series, forty contain abduction or captivity motifs, with thirteen of these featuring the physical abduction of the heroine or the heroine’s child by the hero. Themes of abduction are similarly not unusual in Middle English romance. (138)

Clearly, “abduction is a real-life concern” (139) in the modern context of “high-profile kidnappings of Western men and women, particularly since the commencement of military conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan” (140) while “the second half of the fourteenth century, the period in which Octavian was composed, was the period in which the highest number of cases of kidnap were brought in the Middle Ages” (141). However, Burge suggests that the “female-focused” (142) abductions to be found in medieval and modern romances are “deliberately distanced from the reality of kidnap and might more accurately be termed ‘romance abduction.’ Romance abduction is differentiated from modern-day political kidnap and medieval kidnap for pecuniary gain” (142-43). Romance abduction is carried out by the hero, aims to secure sexual interaction or to facilitate a marriage between hero and heroine, is presented as distinctly nonpolitical […] and is not carried out in order to gain wealth […] Furthermore, the Orientalized space of the romance East is used to define romance abduction and to present it as something quite different from kidnap […]. Romance abduction is reworked as (atemporal) cultural practice or conversion; it is figured as protection or rescue; and it is eroticized, presented as sexual fantasy. (143)

Burge’s examination of “the paradoxical connection between restriction and freedom inherent to the motif in romance” (139) may perhaps fruitfully be read alongside Catherine Roach’s “Love as the Practice of Bondage: Popular Romance Narratives and the Conundrum of Erotic Love” and other papers in the essay collection which resulted from the 2009 conference held in Princeton on the topic of “Love as the Practice of Freedom?”. In the context of the sheikh romance, Burge argues, the loss of freedom for the heroine which results from a romance abduction “serves to normalize or to conceal the patriarchal gender dynamics at its heart” (143).

In the romances Burge studies there is, it would seem, a similarly paradoxical connection between difference and sameness: some differences are considered erotic but, Burge concludes,

the rules of medieval and modern romance require a flattening of difference — an elision of strangeness — rather than an embracing of otherness. The audiences of both Middle English and modern sheikh romance might enjoy the way these texts play with motifs of difference, but the possibility of breaking cross-cultural, interracial, or interreligious boundaries is never really considered. (179-80)

Representing Difference in the Medieval and Modern Orientalist Romance will be of interest to both medievalists and popular romance scholars. The meticulous nature of Burge’s research is especially evident in a number of tables and appendices which will be particularly valuable to those carrying out further research into medieval and modern “saracen”/“sheikh” romances. The placement of medieval romances alongside modern ones yields valuable insights into continuities and discontinuities in British popular culture and Burge’s innovative approach opens up intriguing possibilities for further such juxtapositions. [End Page 7]

Works Cited

Roach, Catherine. “Love as the Practice of Bondage: Popular Romance Narratives and the Conundrum of Erotic Love.” Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom? Ed. William A. Gleason and Eric Murphy
Today we are seeing a growing interest in erotic literature for women. I am thinking about, for example, Catherine M. Roach’s Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture where one chapter argues for an understanding of popular romance novels as feminist pornography (2016) and Elin Abrahamsson’s upcoming doctoral thesis on romance novels and masturbation. After the enormous success of E.L. James Fifty Shades trilogy we have had, at least in Sweden, an explosion of both erotic romance but also of erotica aimed at a female reader. In Women and Erotic Fiction Phillips argues that erotic fiction for women can be empowering. Yet, empowerment is a tricky concept. What does it really mean? Empowering for who? Jennifer Maher writes: “We feminist pop culture critics are skilled at unearthing progressive potential in what might at first appear to be potently sexist or otherwise conservative depictions of women” (194). I have spent a lot of time talking about the empowering and feminist potential in popular romance and notice how I unwillingly fall into the trap of defining the genre and how, when cornered by students to give concrete examples, I notice how I tend not to (give any). This is the dichotomy that Linda Lee discusses in her chapter on romance novels where she says that...
...to semiautobiographical blogs and fan fiction.....

The hunt for women's erotic fiction continues and some chapters leave both romance and erotic novels behind, and focus on other kinds of texts. In “Erotic Pleasure and Postsocialist Female Sexuality: Contemporary Female “Body Writing” in China” Eva Chen reads two Chinese women's so-called “sex blogs” and argues that her discussion focuses more on the genre, on voyeurism and the chimera of “telling the true story” than on the erotic content [End Page 3] of these texts. In a different part of the collection, Victoria Ong has a chapter on a similar kind of text: the auto biographical novel of a sex worker that in several ways discusses similar issues (“Selling Authentic Sex: Working Through Identity in Belle de Jour’s The Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl”). Both these chapters raise interesting questions about authenticity and the even fluctuating border between fact and fiction and as these texts describe young women’s sexual experiences and touch a bit on how these texts have been received, I again would have enjoyed a more detailed discussion on power. I keep scribbling Michel Foucault in the margin of the book and on a few pages, Zygmunt Bauman whose thoughts of how we build our lives on how these texts have been received, I again would have enjoyed a more detailed discussion on power. I keep scribbling Michel Foucault in the margin of the book and on a few pages, Zygmunt Bauman whose thoughts of how we build our lives today in a consumerist society could have benefited both these chapters. A different kind of text is of course the fan fiction of Pirates of the Caribbean that Anne Kustritz discusses in her chapter “The Politics of Slash on the High Seas: Colonial Romance and Revolutionary Solidarity in Pirates Fan Fiction”. Kustritz discusses not just slash fan fiction as a concept but reads these texts through what I would call a intersectional lens, discussing not just desire, but also ethnicity and class in the depictions of James Norrington’s and Jack Sparrow’s love story.

.... to the reader

Two of the chapters approach the concept of women’s erotic fiction from another aspect. In “Male Homoerotic Fiction and Women’s Sexual Subjectivities: Yaoi and BL Fans in Indonesia and the Philippines” Tricia Abigail Santos Fermin discusses manga and anime texts, but from a reader’s perspective via a survey where informants talk about their views of these texts that are often written by women and depicting homosexual men. Alyssa D. Niccolini in “Sexing Education: Erotica in the Urban Classroom” also focuses on readers as her chapter is an empirical study of how erotic texts are read in a classroom. Both chapters have fascinating subjects but would have benefited from being a bit longer as very little information about how the empirical data was collected is included. The studies presented really piqued my interest and in order to fully appreciate the analysis, I would have loved to have had more information about everything from how the informants were selected to the empirical data was collected. How do these texts change the playing field for erotic fiction by making erotic content much more prominent and acceptable. I keep thinking about Imelda Whelehan’s excellent book The Feminist Bestseller that points out how the so called “women’s fiction” of the 1970s has influenced chick lit (2005). Can we trace the development of women’s erotic fiction without Erica Jong’s Fear of Flying for example? And what about the bestseller from the 1980s? Where do Jackie Collins, Shirley Conran and Judith Krantz fit in? Elund’s aim is not to show how erotic fiction has changed but how heteronormativity raises its, if not ugly, omnipresent head. Heteronormativity is a topic that is also discussed in Carole Weldman- Gentz’s chapter on queer content in popular culture, “Selling Gay Sex to Women: The Romance of M/M and M/M/F Romantica.”
On one hand there is a strength in comparing different kind of texts in the way that is done in this collection and let me again stress that the individual analyses evident here are both interesting and thought provoking. But on the other hand, isn't there a risk in "bundling" every text with erotic content aimed at a female reader together without making sure that the different genres of these texts are highly visible? Every good collection of chapters should leave you wanting more and that is true after having read Women and Erotic Fiction and I can only hope that we soon will see more research being done on this vast and very diverse field.

Works Cited:


Review: Men: Notes from an Ongoing Investigation, by Laura Kipnis

Notes from an Ongoing Man

Last was not, to be fair, a great year for Laura Kipnis – or, from another perspective, it was an elegantly apt year for the author of How to Become a Scandal: Adventures in Bad Behavior(2010). In 2015 Kipnis became an international focus for discussions about sex & the academy, and sex in the academy. Northwestern University in Chicago, her employer, created a new rule that stated that student-faculty relationships were not permitted, regardless of any other factors. In response, Kipnis wrote a piece article for The Chronicle of Higher Education (2015) suggesting that part of the college experience is relations between faculty and students. This created an outrage, with people on both sides of the argument writing lengthy diatribes about the matter, and a student filing a Title IX suit against Kipnis. Title IX is a piece of legislation that requires universities to support the equal rights of students based, primarily, on gender and sexuality. These events take place as universities around the USA change policies related to students, student safety, and – in many ways – recreate a form of in loco parentis (in place of the parents) from the early days of US university life; one that particularly works through the trope of the ‘young girl’ in need of protection (Doyle 2015).

Men is about far more than just Kipnis’s scandal – though the book is certainly the embodiment of the canary falling to the mire of, in fact, another review of Men similarly starts with a discussion of the scandal (Elias 2015). It is crucial, before moving too far afield, to situate just slightly the way that she works through the scandal pre-scandal and to note the connections it has with this book and the way that the book – which is, at least titularly, about men – reflects ideas about how we perceive gender relations more broadly. This is part and parcel of the argument being made throughout the book; not only that, the book preempts the scandal itself and therefore the scandal is a part of the book, its reception, and its overall impact.

A Story Told Once; And then Again

In fact, in an almost Žižek or Bauman fashion, Kipnis lifts lines from her own book for the article – published February 27, 2015, while the book was published in November 2014. One such line, which I’d imagine thoroughly stuck in the craw of many, was that ‘sex – even when not so great or someone got their feelings hurt – fell under the category of experience, not trauma. It wasn’t harmful; it didn’t automatically impede your education; sometimes it even facilitated it’ (130) – which is tweaked in the article to: “fell under the category of life experience. It’s not that I didn’t make my share of mistakes, or act stupidly or inchoately, but it was embarrassing, not traumatizing” (Kipnis 2015). It is a small difference, but important nonetheless.

Naomi Wolf famously accused Harold Bloom of sexually harassing her when she was a student – a vignette Kipnis recounts, that concludes with Wolf throwing up in the kitchen after Bloom places his hand on her leg. To which might be added that: “Forget bumbling pathos or social ineptitude – in these accounts, it’s all trauma, all the time” (127). Again, this line is retold from a Slate article where she acerbically notes “If power comes in more than one guise, you will not hear Wolf discuss it” (Kipnis 2004). Questioning Naomi Wolf’s story, she suggests that there is a lot missing from the narrative – including the fact that power is appealing in some instances – and asks what is to be done, coming to the conclusion that “maybe a more nuanced account of male power would be a place to start” (129).

In coming to a conclusion for the chapter, Kipnis says that many professors (some of whom are assholes) hook up with students, and it “would behoove the student to learn the identifying marks” of these characters “early on, because post-collegiate life is full of them too” (135). In a final return to the return, preempting what would be a much lengthier discussion, Kipnis gives a pithy and tone-neutral footnote that her university has changed policies and disallowed faculty-student (or student-faculty, a crucial difference which might belie how we understand these) relations. As a way of conclusion she reminds us that “students aren’t children” (136) and that we ought to recognize the ways that we might well be turning them...
**A focus on Men**

This book, unlike a standard academic book, is short on clear, focused arguments about men or masculinity. In fact, one might suggest that it is purposefully so, as Kipnis is seeking not to expound on a theory of masculinity but on specific men and the ways that they enact forms of masculinity that are contradictory, contextual, and concealing. Thus, to the question of what, if any, theory about men and masculinities Kipnis is seeking to elucidate, she gives an early and quick answer: “a dearth of sweeping theories about the differences between the sexes will be found in the pages ahead” (5). Reflecting on her previous work – *The Female Thing* (2007) – she suggests that *Men* is a “companion volume” and that “the not-always-salutary ways that men and women figure in each other’s imaginations is a theme in both books” (7). The argument of the book, if one were to suggest that a series of repeated essays whose own title suggests that they are but “notes” [End Page 2] could have a fleshy outed argument, is that men – and masculinity – are neither, as Kipnis puts it, a malevolent good nor a diabolical evil.

Throughout the book, Kipnis discusses a “pretty motley lot” (1) of men and masculine figures – to which she adds Andrea Dworkin in the last chapter, a playfully titled chapter ‘Women Who Hate Men’. Starting the book with Larry Flynt and ending with Andrea Dworkin is fittingly purposeful by Kipnis, as someone who has long defended pornography, and who explicitly says so in the ‘Coda’. In this “motley lot” of men, she covers four basic categories: operators (4), neurotics (4), sex fiends (3), and haters (3). These fourteen men (well, thirteen, as one is Dworkin) are book-ended by a preface (‘Regarding Men’) and a post-script. Kipnis does not describe these categories or really give them much definition, leaving us to think about them as fluid and mingling. These categories are comprised of individuals who themselves most likely would never put each other together as a group. In this way the book’s composition is a bit of bricolage. This does not, though, undermine the interesting (and fun) elements of the book.

While oft fairly understanding of her subjects, Kipnis doesn’t shy away from some potshots as well. Of an author of a Hillary biography, who focused heavily on Hillary’s body, she writes: “having seen a few photos of the author – this is a man who can’t have felt entirely secure about his competitive mettle on this score [attractiveness] either” (185). Kipnis continues, saying “Here we’ve entered the realm of male hysteria, where reason and intellect go to die” (190). It is a no-holds barred opening up of men’s wounds at points, which I’m sure has riled up angry white men somewhere. But it is also what makes it a strong discussion – it does so in such a fashion that one is able simultaneously to feel Kipnis’s justification, the men’s anxiety, and a sense of empathy – a balance not managed well oftentimes.

This is not to say that some of the characters in the book don’t come out a bit worse-for-wear; though it is always the underbelly that she is exposing. In talking about Dworkin, she says, “One is tempted to point out that Dworkin either underestimates or just never noticed the vast range of male vulnerability possible in sex” (202). It is this vulnerability that is discussed throughout the book – though frequently coated with humor and a barb or two.

The theme of sex runs throughout the book – whether it is Dworkin’s disdain for it: “Indeed, she was fond of comparing prints and false rumors of Larry Flynt’s impotence. A form of conclusion that she comes to in this regard is that “People want to – and frequently do – have sex with each other for murky and self-deceiving reasons, or for clear-eyed reasons that turn out to be mistaken, or a thousand variations on the theme of erroneous judgment” (206). It seems an appropriate statement for someone so caught up in what amounts to a sex scandal sans sex; but it is also a nuanced statement about gender and desire, and the ways that people find to manage these fears, shames, and anxieties.

She convincingly gives us a clear portrait of men and sexual scripts, saying, “If our most intimate moments turn out to be prescribed, well obviously these are anxious encounters: failure hovers, rejection looms” (88). It is this observation that is the most crucial thing to take away from her book. Providing insight into the fact that “we live in complicated times and no one here’s a saint” (148), and the prolific anxiety of masculinity [End Page 3] is a task that she does far more convincingly than some more ‘serious’ and ‘academic’ books.

**Gender and Complicated Narratives**

For a book so focused on men, it is surprising just how much of the book is really about the author herself – not that this is a bad thing. In fact, what is admirable is that men are never themselves just by themselves, but are always in relation to others: other men, and, more frequently, women. This is important because, as feminism has reminded us for well over forty years, men/women or masculinity/femininity are always relational creations and enactments. For the authors of biographies of Hillary Clinton, Kipnis says “reading these Hillary bios, you feel you’re learning as much about the authors as you do about her, possibly more” (181). In fact, at the root of each chapter is her relationship with this man, or this type of man – “I once dated a gambler semi-briefly (it’s possible there was later some recidivism)” (37).

The overall aim seems to suggest that any thorough study of men and masculinity needs to grapple with the mask that masculinity is, and the way that femininity is wrapped up in much of the discussion of masculinity. One is never in relation simply with other masculine presenting individuals, and as authors we too are part of this puzzle.

The book is an opportunity to think about masculinity and the growing field of Men’s Studies (or Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities). Though it has been around for thirty years (see, for example: Carrigan, Connell & Lee 1985; Kimmel 2012; Connell 2005), masculinity is something that is too often left out of conversations on gender and gender relations. The book acts as a possible lightning rod for scholars on both sides of the aisle to rethink the subject and to begin working through the complexity of masculinities in all their ambiguities. So while Kipnis’s book frequently veers into discussions of gender more generally, it crucially sees the importance of turning the lens onto men and masculinity – something that is both admirable and from which other fields of study could take a cue. The book is valuable for this reason if nothing else to literary studies, romance studies, and the humanities. In coming to a final assessment of the book, it is important to note – particularly as Kipnis is a movie critic and of course understands the importance of aesthetics and the now-clichéd phrase “the medium is the message” – the book itself as an object. This book affirms, time and again, masculinity, from its prose through to its blue and a post-script. Kipnis does not describe these categories or really give them much definition, leaving us to think about them as fluid and mingling. These categories are comprised of individuals who themselves most likely would never put each other together as a group. In this way the book’s composition is a bit of bricolage. This does not, though, undermine the interesting (and fun) elements of the book.

All of which brings us to the question of: “what is the value to someone studying popular romance studies?” To this I can but suggest that its wild, uninhibited articulation of individual characters who themselves are part of a romantic and popular
Review: Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology, by Jayashree Kamblé

July 15th, 2016 |

Review by Karin Heiss

Criticism and analysis within the field of popular romance studies have frequently been performed from a feminist or sociological point of view, primarily focusing on the heroine as the central and determining figure for examination – often read as a means to enable the female reader to “satisfy vicariously those psychological needs created in her by a patriarchal culture unable to fulfill them” (Radway 66; see also Roach n.pag., Cohn 6, Makinen 23). Jayashree Kamblé, however, takes a quite different, and therefore refreshingly interesting approach not just to the function of the romance genre, but how the meaning that makes this genre function as a “sociological record” (22) is semiotically generated and constructed within the romance text. She further explores how far this construction of meaning and its change over the twentieth and twenty-first century are concurrent with larger social transformations in the West, especially the US, the UK, and Canada. This demonstration is achieved by a focus on the figure of the romance novel hero, which has to date not been covered in a sociology of masculinity.

Kamblé isolates four such ways of constructing meaning and traces them through popular romance fiction in general as its goal – it becomes quite clear in the introductory pages how the frame for the analysis was achieved.

Approach and Definitions

Working with Marxist and Semiotic theory, as can be deduced when Kamblé draws heavily on Weber, Jameson, Marcuse and Bakhtin for central definitions, the first vital element of understanding her claim that “the genre is in the thick of discourse is something to strive for and a writing style that academics themselves might ascribe to. For Kipnis, in this book, the unbearable weight of academia is stifling; and it is here where the discipline (and this journal's readers) might take a cue. Never one to take herself too seriously, Men allows readers to jaunt along rather than be taken along on a grueling march. Readers will find themselves laughing throughout, as well as reflecting on the way that topics keep coming up. The book provides short and entertaining insights into the topic of masculinity, and could certainly be used in a class setting.

As an academic book it is perhaps less useful; Kipnis herself says that she is “actually a bit on the margins, academically speaking” (12, footnote), so I am not sure she would disagree or be offended by that claim. While the book is a wonderful example of hilarity, it is less given to use or inclusion as part of a canon of extant literature on the study of popular romance. Nowhere in the book does it relate itself to a set of literatures, and in this way it posits itself somewhat outside of them. This book will most likely be of greater value to those interested in popular essays – authors such as David Sedaris, Joan Didion, James Baldwin, or Chuck Klosterman – than to those who study primarily popular romance literature. Essays, particularly literary or more popular essays, work to give insights rather than make arguments. In this way, one might suggest that the book – and the essays that comprise it – is not, in fact, an argument but an exposition – in both the sense of exhibition and of writing which expounds on something.

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specific novel trait. The latter allows for “multiple modes of representing consciousness” (8), thus incorporating specific “devices to express interiority” (10) and resulting in “the novel trait of perspectival fluidity inherited by the romance novel genre” (14).

The ‘romance’ in the romance novel is then conceptualized not only in terms of the genealogical generic tradition as it has been, for example in Pamela Regis’ A Natural History of the Romance Novel (2003), but in its implications of ‘romantic’, “which codes for the traits of the erotic, the desirable, the pleasurable – for what is ‘romantic’ to the reader/apprehender under modernity and postmodernity” (15). Thus, the function of the novel to adapt and express interiority abets the development and incorporation of changing notions of the romantic (i.e. acceptable as desirable) as specific to the figure of the romance hero in the genre. This allows Kambé to focus on “the set of conditions that allow the story to be ‘romantic’” (20) and those conditions are wont to change historically and geographically. Consequently, they are the ones she then sets about tracing in her analyses. Her project is “[s]urveying developments in romance fiction alongside selected historical changes in political and economic policy and in social norms in the West […] [to perform a] political interpretation of romance fiction, which neither denies the current relevance of these novels to gender struggle nor overlooks the historical developments that have shaped the ‘formula’” (22).

In examining the romance hero in conjunction with major transformations regarding multinational capitalism, changing perspectives on war, developments of gay rights and the connection between whiteness as an ideology and religious ethos, the study takes into account the diverse but sometimes overlapping judicial and political developments and their discursive effects on the construction of the hero in the three nations mentioned above. This distinction also governs the micro-structure of the chapters, alongside the distinction between publishing houses/format and subgenres. However, when it comes to the analyses that support Kambé’s claims, two questions that are not addressed arise. The first is in how far it actually makes an interpretative difference to examine category novels side by side with single-title ones. The second would be an inquiry into the criteria on which the “major authors” (23) chosen for examination in the single-title category have been selected (namely J.D. Robb (Nora Roberts), Judith McNaught, Lindsey McKenna, Johanna Lindsey, Lisa Kleypas, Sherrilyn Kenyon, Gaelen Foley, Suzanne Brockmann, and Lindy Howard). Moreover, the jump between subgenres surely supports the argument of the text, however, the implications of the changing settings and subgeneric literary and narrative traditions are left unexplored or at least unaccounted for, since it could be argued that the hero appearing in these diverse settings also imposes limits on the possibilities of representing him and on the meanings that can be generated. [End Page 2]

Structurally, the text is clearly divided – chronological recapitulation of social transformation in the aforementioned nations is followed by detailed (close) readings (again, chronologically ordered with regard to their year of publication) of a wide variety of romance novels, in order to drive home the point of the complex relationship between ideological movements and popular romantic constrictions of the hero.

Capitalism

Firstly, the analysis of the representation of capitalism in the figure of the hero traces the developments of “faults […] and attractions of capitalism […] represented by the corresponding off-putting or seductive traits of the lover” (32) and the function of the capitalist as romantic hero who serves to “personalize[e] the abstract economic force of the free market” (32).[1] From the 1950s onwards, Mills and Boon contemporary category romances incorporate more and more heroes who are financially superior to the heroine, effectively setting up a connection between hero and businessman and, starting in the 1960s, the plot motif of the hostile takeover in Mills and Boon is introduced, in which the heroine is in an economically disadvantaged position in comparison to the hero (be it due to, for example, her being his employee or him taking over her family firm). Class interests are thus not only expressed in the difference between the owner of capital (hero as bourgeois) and the working population (heroine as petit bourgeois/proletariat), but also in gendered terms (39). Kambé convincingly argues that Mills and Boon “novels […] represent a socioeconomic drama of the way British national firms and the people in the workforce faced Britain’s changing economic landscape” (40). The romance genre in particular deals with this threat of capitalism by positing the hero as less powerful in another arena, as can be seen when his declaration of love endorses “the romantic relationship [that] neutralizes the threat of the all-powerful capitalist” (35).

Concerning the American romance, Kambé examines how single-title historical romances negotiate the wealthy hero and his capitalist tendencies, arguing that historical romance “heroes, especially after the eighties, are actually capitalists in aristocrats’ clothing” (42). Here, the main focus is the “nagging apprehension of the capitalist’s dark side, ranging from the suspicion of [the hero’s] underhanded business deals to fears of his propensity for violence and crime” (49). Thus, the hero is often introduced as ruthless and dangerous in his capitalist dealings, but found to be benevolent by the heroine later-on in the narrative, thus at least partially allaying the genre’s anxiety about the nature of capitalist ventures. Kambé therefore successfully proves her point and demonstrates how the “genre has adapted itself to match the rhetoric that idealizes capitalist individualism and accumulation of private property as well as the consumer capitalist ability to create and manipulate desire” (59), while still detecting the representation of a critical stance in the genre (here especially in J.D. Robb’s In Death series) by the continual depiction of the possibility “that capitalism’s alter ego is composed of equal parts of robbery, deception, and homicide” (55). [End Page 3]

War

Secondly, economic capitalist and military issues are shown to be intimately intertwined in the figure of the hero, since through the “hero as warrior […] romance novels encapsulate the impact of a curious feature of post-modernity – the constant intrusion of international conflict onto the public consciousness” (61). Early Mills and Boon romances that represent the imperial soldier in his colonial quest are located and briefly analysed, but the main focus is on the American romance in this section. Documenting the influence of Cold War ideology and rhetoric in novels from the 1970s-1990s and the reaction to the first Gulf War and 9/11, it becomes clear that the romance hero moves from a concentration on “bravery and strategic thinking” (64) to additionally exhibiting “self-critique and self-doubt” (64). Therefore, the war is personalized, offering the possibility of a compassionate evaluation of the impact of war on the individual who fights it, for example through the representation of PTSD.

In a second move, the American popular romance points towards “the amorality that jingoistic policy breeds in its enforcers” (64). It is shown how the courtship and romance plot suggests but at the same time complicates solutions for the effect of war and patriotism on characters and their ethical behaviour. The draw towards loyalty to the nation and the drive towards the achievement of the romance’s happy ending work at cross-purposes, as Kambé demonstrates using the example of...
Jan Cohn makes a similar argument, only her focus is firmly on the resulting impact of bourgeois patriarchal society and on the romance hero and his textual transformations. Kamblé’s interpretation of scenes of rape or ‘forced seduction’ in the romance novel of the seventies and eighties – a plot device that has long been a major point of criticism of the genre as a whole. Kamblé argues that “the timing of the motif’s appearance in the eighties, unprecedented in the genre’s nearly 70-year history, suggests that the focus on forceful male desire for a woman is a reaffirmation of heterosexuality” (109). Thus, instead of reading the rape scenes as a power imbalance that reinforces patriarchal structures even as they are criticized (a point which nevertheless holds true in such a reading), Kamblé suggests that it is also central in another power struggle – the one between heterosexuality and homosexuality, in which “masculinity […] expresses its heterosexual identity through the rape of the heroine” (108).

Additionally, the development of the cross-dressing heroine in the nineties and the motif’s underlying homoerotics that introduce a “secondary queer narrative” (114) is examined (a similar interpretation has been made by Fletcher in her chapter on the Cross-Dressed heroine in Historical Romance Fiction(58-72), but focusing on the novels of Georgette Heyer, who, interestingly enough, uses the motif much earlier than the novels Kamblé suggests). Kamblé also explores the twenty-first century dual plot trend that incorporates a homosexual love story as subplot in a heterosexual one. Here, however, the implications of the fact that it is male homosexual relationships that are primarily added rather than female homosexual relationships would perhaps have warranted further exploration.

**Whiteness**

The fourth element of the episteme is located as an inherent Western-ness and thus whiteness in the representation of the romance hero and especially his relationship to the white heroine. Their connection is shown to be rooted in a spiritual concern the paranormal romance, identifying it in a Bakhtinian sense as “the genre’s turn toward the carnivalesque (with its impulses (134) and working towards a bourgeois understanding of (re)production. In this chapter, the most interesting point concerns the paranormal romance, identifying it in a Bakhtinian sense as “the genre’s turn toward the carnivalesque (with its connotations of challenging the socially regulated everyday world)” (148). Reading Nalini Singh’s Psy-Changeling series as representative of the subgenre’s potential for “paving the way for the genre’s transformation into a racially diverse form” (148), it is demonstrated how an author with non-Western roots discursively incorporates elements of non-Western understandings of the romance hero and his representation with regard to social structures and social functions, thus also turning the paranormal romance and this specific example into a “commentary on colonial history and its racist legacies” (156).

Overall, the approach of analyzing the ideology that informs the depiction of the popular romance hero in a book-length study is a highly valuable contribution to the field. Kamblé’s text on occasion oscillates between being accessible to a more general audience and a peer group of scholars in that it sometimes gives no precise definitions of central terms – such as ideology, normativity or desire – terms that a peer group is probably familiar with, but that should nonetheless be clearly delineated in order to prevent points of criticism and obfuscation of the argument. These comments notwithstanding, Kamblé certainly makes a compelling argument for her reading of the romance hero within a Marxist frame that demonstrates the versatility of the popular romance novel as an arena for negotiation in which historically and culturally specific discourses are commented upon, reworked and sometimes subverted by the combination of the courtship/merger plot and the novelistic traits and subplots which adapt upon incitement by social change. Therefore, the book is definitely a significant contribution to the field, addressing it both to the scholarly and the popular audience, providing a comprehensive analysis of the genre’s evolution and its ideological implications.
its economic power imbalance on women. Cohn also reads the popular romance as a narrative space for the negotiation of actual social and economic decisions: “The fantasy provided by popular romance exists to redress the real social and economic conditions of women in the world of the present; but the strategies and codes through which romance constructs and communicates fantasy have their roots in history, in the development of bourgeois society. […] The social contradictions that inform such novels are buried deep in romance stories, charging them with subversive energy” (3).

Works Cited


Review: Love Between the Covers, produced, written, and directed by Laurie Kahn

July 15th, 2016

Review by Beth Driscoll

Australian universities and popular romance fiction may be moving towards their own Happily Ever After. Growing scholarly interest in romance fiction here includes presentations on romance fiction at large conferences, a special Australia issue of the Journal of Popular Romance Studies and the award of a large Federal Government grant to study the genre worlds of romance, fantasy and crime in Australia.[1] For researchers and teachers looking to build upon this momentum, Laurie Kahn’s documentary Love Between the Covers is a valuable resource: a lively collection of interviews and footage that is sure to stimulate thought.

The greatest achievement of Love Between the Covers is that it presents the complexity of romance fiction as an ecosystem. Rather than pursuing a single clear narrative, the documentary offers a number of case studies that are surrounded by an assemblage of snapshots of the romance fiction industry. There are scenes showing pitches, marketing meetings, writing critique sessions, authors’ retreats, book signings, cover photo shoots, and writers writing, as well as interviews with authors, readers, editors, bloggers, and academics. This variety is a strength of the documentary, and sociologically minded students and scholars will value the insights into romance fiction’s intricate, vibrant networks and systems.

At the same time, the multiplicity of short scenes produces a somewhat chaotic viewing experience. For those coming from a literary studies background, in particular, the fast cuts of the film highlight romance fiction’s otherness from ‘high’ literature—the noise, the sociality, the predominance of women, the commercial imperatives. This disorienting effect could obscure the film’s value for those who are searching for analytical frameworks to help them write about romance novels. Such frameworks are there in the film, touched upon briefly: interviewees discuss themes such as heroism, courage and love, and recognise romance fiction’s feminist commitment to women’s pleasure and success.

In one interview that could spark discussion, novelist Jennifer Crusie notes that great literature is often “toxic to women” but in romance “you get rewarded for going after what you want.” The more detailed case studies also open up important lines of inquiry. Author Eloisa James, for example, is a professor of English Literature but describes being a valuable resource: a lively collection of interviews and footage that is sure to stimulate thought.

Students in graduate publishing, writing, and editing courses will benefit not only from the film’s depiction of the multidimensional publishing process, but also its insights into industry change. Romance fiction leads the industry in digital innovation—uptake of ebooks, digital book talk and self-publishing—and the sector should be closely observed. In particular, the film’s mixed accounts of self-publishing reward attention. Amongst comments from several interviewees about the pros and cons of self-publishing, the documentary offers the case study of Joanne Lockyer, an aspiring Australian romance author. Lockyer decides to self-publish her first novel; we see footage of the moment she uploads her book to Amazon, and the moment she delightedly unboxes the print-on-demand copies. This dramatic representation of the ease and satisfaction of self-publishing should catalyse discussions about the role of publishers in a changing industry.

The film shows romance fiction as an ecosystem, but a profoundly human and social one, and this is the aspect of the film that I found most interesting as a researcher of book culture. I was moved by the expressions of closeness between authors and readers—a feature of the romance genre, where authors often interact with their readers online and in person. This was beautifully captured through the film’s interviews with Kim Castillo, an author assistant. “Nobody in my house read,” Castillo recalls, but she connected with fellow readers when she started her first job, at age 14, as a sewing machine operator. Her co-workers mostly read romance, using a cardboard box as a lending library. Castillo struck up a correspondence with Eloisa James (in the film, James says “Kim was by far the most articulate who wrote to me”), and then came to work with
and wish us harm, Jarmakani muses, then we have yet another justification for waging war.

For example, by insisting that our own values—self-determination, freedom, democracy, etc.—are universal values, of course. Interpretation, especially since the majority of these novels are expressly free of politics, religion, and even real-world geography. An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror (2015), the most recent entry into this discussion, reads these novels not as a response to the war on terror but as part of the necessary cultural work that makes this war possible.

Jarmakani’s book joins other recent analyses by Hsu-Ming Teo, Amy Burge, and Stacy Holden. Teo is a cultural historian who, in Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novel (2012), examines the role of “the Orient” in Western cultural texts from the Second Crusade onward. She factors in the national contexts of the UK, the US, and Australia, and her analysis of popular romance includes types of Orientalist romance less widely studied, such as historicals. Burge, a British medievalist, has a book forthcoming called Representing Difference in the Medieval and Modern Orientalist Romance (Palgrave, 2016), which builds on her 2012 doctoral thesis. This is by far the most systematic, precisely designed study of sheikh romance to date; her book analyzes change and continuity in romantic fantasies about the “romance East.” Holden’s article “Love in the Desert” (2015) draws on a series of disarmingly frank interviews she held with editors and authors of sheikh romance and examines their goals and constraints. As a historian specializing in the modern Middle East and North Africa, Holden has a solid grounding in the political context of the novels.

Jarmakani makes a lively contribution to this scholarship. She is primarily a theorist, and her work delves heavily into critical race and gender theory, as well as psychoanalytic theory. As such, her work is in some ways a better fit with the early feminist critics of popular romance, Tania Modleski and Janice Radway, than with the other scholars working on sheikh romance. However, her theoretical approach is not what will make this book most valuable to romance scholars: instead, it is her insistence that we read these books from the perspective of the Arab and/or Middle Eastern and/or Muslim characters. Many analyses of popular romance foreground gender, so this is a welcome addition. Her examples draw our attention to those ubiquitous scenes of silent, indistinguishable women in hijab, scenes not unique to sheikh romance but permeating American media. Because Jarmakani comes to popular romance through her scholarly interest in cultural representations of Arab and Muslim women, she is not particularly interested in the novelists’ intentions, or the potential effect of these novels on their readers, or even the texts themselves. Instead, she explores the way in which tropes and motifs in these books fit within a larger context of American ideas about the Middle East.

Two parts of this book were published before: “The Sheik Who Loved Me: Romancing the War on Terror” (2010) in InSights, and “Desiring the Big Bad Blade: Racing the Sheikh in Desert Romances” (2011) in American Quarterly. While both are solid stand-alone pieces, this book joins them in an overarching argument using ideas from transnational feminism, critical theory, and psychoanalytic theory via Deleuze and Guattari.

An Imperialist Love Story places sheikh romance firmly in the context of neoliberalism, American political ideology, and liberal multiculturalism. Jarmakani argues that imperialism may look different than it did in earlier centuries, but it is still alive and well, providing real economic benefit to the Western nations that engage in it. Most of us, however, do not like to think of ourselves as intervening in foreign nations for economic or political gain; thus, as a culture we prefer to understand our actions as benevolent, perhaps an effort to rescue oppressed people from merciless regimes or vicious jihadists. We also like to see these interventions as atypical, temporary responses to exceptional circumstances, rather than a characteristic strategy for exploiting other parts of the world for their labor, their natural resources, and geopolitical advantages. Interpreting self-serving military action as aid requires some serious spin, which we can accomplish in a number of ways. For example, by insisting that our own values—self-determination, freedom, democracy, etc.—are universal values, of benefit to everyone, we can interpret many foreign governments or cultures as in urgent need of intervention. The Middle East, with its vast oil reserves and strategic location vis-à-vis Europe and Russia, has historically been an irresistible target for such intervention. If decades of feeding off assorted Western militaries should prompt people in the region to hate us and wish us harm, Jarmakani muses, then we have yet another justification for waging war.

**Review: An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror, by Amira Jarmakani**

**July 15th, 2016 | Review by Heather Schell**

In recent years, there has been a surge of academic interest in the sheikh romance, or what some call “desert romance.” The term describes a small subgenre that appears primarily as category romance, in which the Western heroine finds herself at the mercy of a domineering Middle-Eastern sheikh; common conventions of the novels include captivity, sand, harems, invented geography, horses, and, ideally, feminist reforms in the sheikh’s sadly backward kingdom. These novels have a long and storied history, but one might have expected the events of September 11, 2001, and contemporary American military involvement in the Middle East, to make the form less popular. Instead, publication nearly quadrupled.

Jarmakani’s book joins other recent analyses by Hsu-Ming Teo, Amy Burge, and Stacy Holden. Teo is a cultural historian who, in Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novel (2012), examines the role of “the Orient” in Western cultural texts from the Second Crusade onward. She factors in the national contexts of the UK, the US, and Australia, and her analysis of popular romance includes types of Orientalist romance less widely studied, such as historicals. Burge, a British medievalist, has a book forthcoming called Representing Difference in the Medieval and Modern Orientalist Romance (Palgrave, 2016), which builds on her 2012 doctoral thesis. This is by far the most systematic, precisely designed study of sheikh romance to date; her book analyzes change and continuity in romantic fantasies about the “romance East.” Holden’s article “Love in the Desert” (2015) draws on a series of disarmingly frank interviews she held with editors and authors of sheikh romance and examines their goals and constraints. As a historian specializing in the modern Middle East and North Africa, Holden has a solid grounding in the political context of the novels.

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Jarmakani’s argument thus far is familiar. Her next step takes us into the terrain of psychoanalytic theory, but at the level of culture rather than the individual. Our relationship with the Middle East is all about desire, she argues, but in the sheikh romance, we reimagine our political and economic desires as other kinds of desire: to mate, to affiliate, to help. In this regard, the “romantic sheikh is contemporary US imperialist personified” (xix). He is a companion figure to the terrorist, both of whom spur us to intervene in the region. While the terrorist motivates through fear, the sheikh motivates through desire, and in his contemporary incarnation he is not only a romance hero but also political ally, willing to cooperate with the US and representing views on human rights and strategic economic interests that “Anglo-American powers” want to foster. While other scholars have interpreted the sheikh romance as working against popular rhetoric about Islamic extremism, Jarmakani suggests that the reconciliation we see in these books serves our national political agenda and expresses the same imperialist tendencies, albeit in a more benevolent guise. Her analysis of the heroine also has a political framework, drawing our attention to the feminist imperialist fantasies (of rescuing our helpless foreign sisters) played out in these novels.

My single favorite concept in this book arises from Jarmakani’s discussion of the setting of sheikh romance. The twenty-first century sheikh romance usually takes place in an imaginary land, in which authors invent kingdoms and customs with a freewheeling disregard for the real world, even while a number of conventional features (such as sand, harem, horses, and exotic dress) create a recognizable if fictitious landscape for readers. To scholars struggling to describe this setting, Jarmakani offers the term “Arabistani.”[1] Use of the term nods towards the Orientalist fantasy yet draws our attention to the geo-political implications of this space. Additionally, Arabistani cleverly mirrors the convention in contemporary sheikh romance of inventing one’s own country.

To return to the issue of feminism, Jarmakani criticizes scholarship on romance for relying on “empowerment” or “choice” feminism. This popular version of feminism rests on the idea that anything a woman does to make herself feel good and powerful is inherently a feminist act, merely because she is a woman exercising her choice. While choice may well be a necessary condition to feminist action, it is not a sufficient one—just consider J.K. Rowling’s memorable Dolores Umbridge, who is quite empowered by her choices.

Has scholarship on popular romance relied on this facile definition of feminism? If so, Jarmakani’s analysis does not demonstrate it. She asserts that “one of the key debates in both scholarly and industry online conversations about romance novels is about the extent to which the books can be considered feminist cultural productions focused positively on female sexual pleasure as opposed to oppressive ‘trash’ books that inure the mostly female readerships to the evils of patriarchy” (82-83). This startling claim can be attributed to the fact that this section of her argument has not been updated since it first appeared in the 2010 Signs article. One of her main sources is Sally Goade’s edited collection of essays, *Empowerment versus Oppression* (2007). Not surprisingly, Jarmakani finds plentiful discussion of empowerment in Goade’s book, but this cannot support a broader argument about the direction of the field in general. Other examples are even older, and nothing is more recent than 2007. That said, I agree with Jarmakani that associating personal empowerment with feminism is problematic in a scholarly context. Given that American popular culture, media, and advertising today still pitch empowerment as feminism, it can come as no surprise that romance novelists and their readers might embrace the same definition. We might be tempted to read all romance novels as inherently feminist, merely because, as Pamela Regis notes, their narrative structure empowers fictional heroines (15), or because women choose to write them. Jackie Horne, however, recommends a more productive and reflective response, urging scholars/readers to ask themselves, “Can this particular book be considered feminist, and if so, in what ways?” (Horne, n.p.).

Jarmakani’s argument should provoke productive discussion. If we compare Teo’s conclusions in *Desert Passions* to Jarmakani’s, we find that Teo notes similar problems to the ones Jarmakani identifies—the novels’ inaccuracy, heroes who are “White men” performing in “Arab-face” (Teo 303), passive, speechless Arab women who can only achieve personhood through the American heroine’s efforts—but these two scholars approach the same material in dramatically different ways. Teo argues that “however misguided or inaccurate” these novels may be, “surely the humanizing of Arab and Muslim males—their representation as attractive and intelligent potential lovers, partners, husbands, and fathers—represents the ability of this particular form of women’s popular culture to temper negative stereotypes that seem ubiquitous today” (303). Jarmakani dismisses Teo’s interpretation as a fantasy of liberal multiculturalism, in which “positive representations are seen as a useful response to negative representations” (20). Instead, she argues, this kind of binary opposition only strengthens stereotypes (20).

Holden maintains that these two stances are a choice point:

> Read skeptically, against the grain, these novels present a fantasy in which autocratic leaders of the Arab world—these sheikhs who love American women—embrace the values of their Western fiancées and wives, reconciling their two cultures in a way that secures and privileges American interests. But read more generously, in the light of their authors’ intentions, the sheikh romance novel does present a hopeful vision of the world, one in which . . . individuals from two worlds, now at odds, . . . [can] fall in love, resolve their differences, and live harmoniously together (17).

I would have to agree with Holden; both interpretations have merit and can be substantiated with compelling evidence. However, I would add that close reading offers a different perspective from broad observation. Because Jarmakani examines these novels piecemeal, it is hard to see the distinctions that might challenge or complicate her argument. Consider Brenda Jackson’s novel *Delaney’s Desert Sheikh*, which Jarmakani notes is the only mainstream sheikh romance written by an African-American novelist. Broadly speaking, *Delaney’s Desert Sheikh* follows the typical fantasy of feminist Orientalism, with a Tahran sheikh marrying a foreign woman who then introduces women’s rights into his country. A closer reading reveals an interesting spin: the feminist reformer is not the heroine, nor is she American. Queen Fatimah, originally from Egypt, is the hero’s stepmother and an important character in the book. Indeed, her progressive reform was initiated from Egypt, is the hero’s stepmother and an important character in the book. In sharp contrast to what Jarmakani notes is the more typical “assumption of Arabistani women’s ignorance and helplessness” (104). Indeed, Jarmakani points to a scene early in the novel when the sheikh jokes that the heroine might start “a women’s rights revolution” in his home country, yet she asserts that Jackson “backs away from [this] idea” of revolution because it “seems to come too close to readers’ fears about the region” (108). Closer attention to the narrative makes it clear that the sheikh’s joke was amusing because that revolution had occurred a decade or so earlier.

*Delaney’s Desert Sheikh* shares the fantasy of feminist liberation but does not imagine that Anglo-American women must be
the ones to instigate it. Brenda Jackson was born in 1953 and came of age during the Black Power era, when the Nation of Islam was a salient model of Muslim identity and black pride. She called her sheikh Jamal, a popular Arabic name choice for African-American boys in the United States since the 1970s. Prince Jamal’s mother was originally from Africa, as was his stepmother, giving him a shared racial ancestry with the heroine. This sheikh is less exotic, less alien, more familiar, than the sheikhs who woo white heroines. In fact, the heroine learns more about Jamal’s country from her brother, who has met Jamal’s father. And we should note that this book is ranked by Goodreads readers as one of their favorite sheikh romances.

This brings me to the conclusion of Jarmakani’s book, where she plays with “the possibility of reading the story—whatever story one has been reading or telling about the war on terror—in a different way” (191). This compelling recommendation invites us to look back at An Imperialist Love Story as an elegant model of how such rereading might be undertaken. She reminds us that it is important to look at the ideological work of certain genres, both within romance but also outside of it. Remarkably, this book’s most significant contribution to the field is simultaneously its major limit: examining sheikh romances in this larger context gives us insight into their appeal but also obscures the ways that some of these novels and their authors push at genre boundaries and blur the complexity of readers’ responses. It’s worth considering a possibility that her book seems to dismiss: that some readers and writers are already reading this story in a different way.

[1] I also quite like Amy Burge’s term, the “romance East,” which foregrounds generic considerations and the continuities of this Orientalist landscape over time. [End Page 5]

Works Cited


[End Page 6]

Review: Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television, edited by Michael DeAngelis

July 15th, 2016 | Review by Ruth O'Donnell

Michael DeAngelis’s edited collection Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television (2014) is a timely contribution to film scholarship on the subject of bromance in its various media iterations. The term bromance, bringing together ‘bro-’ with ‘romance’, is an attempt to capture the idea of a male intimacy that simultaneously quashes any potential for sexual expression. As DeAngelis suggests, the very concept of bromance is suffused with paradox and contradiction: “bromance involves something that must happen (the demonstration of intimacy itself) on the condition that other things do not happen (the avowal or expression of sexual desire between straight men)” (p.1).

It is a phenomenon that may be simultaneously homosocial, homoerotic and homophobic in aspect; at its heart lies a deep ambivalence about sexual equality and gay rights. Bromance is profoundly heteronormative in aspect, as well as potentially misogynistic. This collection of essays provides a sophisticated analysis of the anxieties prevalent in modern Western masculinity that bromantic screen relations give voice to and, through a range of methods, seek to defuse.

The term bromance, as a signifier of close emotional male bonds in a context of heterosexual friendship, did not reach common parlance until the mid-2000s, by which time it had entered popular vocabulary and culture through films such as I Love You, Man (John Hamburg, 2009) and Superbad (Greg Mottola, 2007), developing its own film genre and marketing rationale. The first section of essays in the collection takes a historical purview of American culture and manifestations of bromantic narrative elements prior to its recognition as a genre by Hollywood.

In the opening chapter, Jenna Weinman offers a comparative account of early sixties romantic comedies starring Rock Hudson, Doris Day and Tony Rudd and the millennial Bromance in ‘Second Bananas and Gay Chicken: Bromancing the Rom-Com in the Fifties and Now’. The love triangles that typified the Hudson-Day relationships of films such as Pillow Talk (Michael Gordon, 1959) and That Touch of Mink (Delbert Mann, 1962) were [End Page 1] paralleled by immature male friendships that were threatened — and finally usurped — by heterosexual romance. Weinman compares such narratives to later films such as The 40-Year-Old Virgin (Judd Apatow, 2005) and Knocked Up (Judd Apatow, 2007), suggesting that both genres prioritize male-male bonds over those of romantic love, with little promise that such homosocial immaturity will be resolved by the social demands of marriage and fatherhood.

In ‘Grumpy Old Men’: “Bros before Hoes” Hilary Radner interrogates the film series that provides a model of male-male bonds mediated by a female love interest as a way of undermining any suggestion of homosexual interest. This dynamic calls to mind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s definition of male homosociality described in Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (1985). Sedgwick talks of the triangulation of desire, in which men develop intense bonds with one another that are expressed indirectly through a female third party (p1). Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau’s pairing in the 1993 film Grumpy Old Men (Donald Petrie) referred to the 1960s buddy film The Odd Couple (Gene Saks, 1968), the title of
which draws attention to a potentially extra-normative bond between the two men. In *Grumpy Old Men*, the characters Lemmon and Matthau play find themselves competing for the affections of the (younger) Ariel (Ann-Margret), which allows their close relationship to remain unscruftinised. The film appears to evince nostalgia for a previous era in which such male bonds were taken at face value and did not require the bromantic alibi that Ariel’s presence provides.

In ‘Fears of a Millennial Masculinity: Scream’s Queer Killers’ David Greven traces the trajectory of pre-bromance experiments in homosocial intimacy and their expression as psychopathology in the teen horror genre, looking at Scream (Wes Craven, 1996) as a case study. In common with the bromance, such horror films are characterised by immaturity and male bonds that are interrupted by the presence of a maligned female character. Both genres ‘promote intensely defensive responses to sexuality’ (pp. 80-81) but in the horror film only through the death of these ‘queer’ male protagonists can patriarchal order be restored.

The second section of the book focuses on the contemporary cinematic bromance, looking both at canonical Hollywood films that have come to be associated with the term, as well as key examples from world cinema.

Chapter four, ‘I Love You, You: Y tu mama también as Border-Crossing Romance’, by Nick Davis, analyses a film that pre-empted the North American inception of the bromance and, in its privileging of a male homosocial narrative, forced the US industry to pay attention to the market for such work. Indeed, *Y tu mama también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001) goes further than its US counterparts in following through with a homosexual encounter between the principal characters. That it is a relationship facilitated by a strong female protagonist that exists in the place of the marginal roles assigned to Hollywood women, further suggests a tension between the Mexican and US cultural industries that the film reflects.

Meheli Sen’s chapter, ‘From *Dostana* to Bromance: Buddies in Hindi Commercial Cinema Reconsidered’ takes as its study the *dostana* genre, looking at its development from the 1970s to the present day. Representation of the masculine code of friendship known as *dostana* was transformed during this period of Hindi cinema. The intense bonds of love and loyalty and concomitant gestures of sacrifice characterising the ‘Bachan film’ are [End Page 2] tempered by subsequent iterations of the buddy film in a more recent Indian cinema, increasingly informed by globalisation and the expression of individual desire.

The remaining contributions of the second section of the book turn their attention to representations of the bromance in Hollywood film. In ‘From *Batman to I Love You, Man: Queer Taste, Vulgarity and the Bromance as Sensibility and Film Genre’ Ken Feil explores the use of ‘gross-out’ comedy in popular culture to disavow another vulgarity that looms in the threat of eroticisation of the male body. Looking at films such as *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (Dennis Dugan, 2007), *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (Adam McKay, 2004) and *I Love You, Man* Feil traces how representations of ‘masculine vulgarity’ that both marginalise and objectify women and gay men work to strengthen homosocial intimacy (while negating its homosexual expression).

In ‘Rad Bromance (or I Love You, Man but We Won’t Be Humping on Humpday)’ Peter Forster questions the fundamental dissonance evident in the term ‘bro-mance’ and its wider implications in the analysis of two films, one Hollywood, one American independent. Two issues arise: first, the dangerous proximity of homosociality to homosexuality; second, the freedom allowed by homosocial bonds that threatens to be negated by the heterosexual dyad. Whilst the film narrative may encourage its protagonists to deviate from the demands of the heterosexual romance, the culmination of the plot insist upon its male protagonists giving up their treasured male friendships in favour of heteronormative pulls.

Michael DeAngelis in his chapter ‘Queerness and Futurity in *Superbad*’ interrogates the notion of ‘queerness’, not in relation to characters or matters of representation, but in terms of narrative time itself. *Superbad*’s exploration of temporality brings into question the normalcy of time in so far as it supports heteronormative narrative structure. DeAngelis examines how theoretical concepts of ‘futurity, straight time, and queer time can help illuminate the strategies’ (p. 215) used to explore the homosocial connections employed in contemporary bromance, taking *Superbad* as his case study. Ultimately, the film’s closing scenes do little to undermine the more meaningful scenes of intimacy between the two protagonists, Seth (Jonah Hill) and Evan (Michael Sera), at their sleepover prior to their departure for college. The ending, which matches the pair with two female love interests (with whom they were previously unsuccessful), instead ‘intensifies the queer bond between the bromancers by rendering the familiar strange’. (p. 228) The film offers the pair no future together that can accommodate their intimacy so they are forced to renounce each other and part.

The final section of the collection explores depictions of bromance beyond the Hollywood comedy genre, looking at three analyses of bromantic relationships in US television drama.

In ‘Becoming Bromosexual: Straight Men, Gay Men and Male Bonding on US TV’ Ron Becker argues that greater visibility of the gay community in the 1990s was met with mounting anxiety in TV representations of male-male friendships, which led to a shift in bromantic discourse in the following decade. ‘Mistaken identity’ plots, in which male protagonists were taken as gay, articulated such anxieties and were popular in network TV shows including *Friends* and *Frasier*. Becker also examines more recent reality TV programming, including the knowingly named *Bromance*, which presents effeminacy as a greater threat to homosocial bonding than homosexuality itself.

Murray Pomerance’s subject of investigation is the House and Wilson friendship in the US TV series *House*. Pomerance describes the ‘stunt’ of the titular character performing the cultural signifiers of homosexuality in order to befriend, and ultimately seduce Nora (Sasha Alexander), an attractive neighbour in Wilson’s apartment block. The stunt depends on the ‘target recognising and reading the cues that he provides her with. As Wilson (Robert Sean Leonard) has already expressed a sexual interest in the same woman, House’s (Hugh Laurie) performance becomes a show of heterosexual masculine competition, with each more invested in the other’s failure than in romantic success with Nora herself. Wilson is only able to defeat House by staging a public proposal, which simultaneously destroys both their chances, while perversely confirming their commitment to each other. Moreover, the episode ends with the pair watching a hockey game together, while bickering about furniture and singing show tunes. Such simultaneous signifiers of the heteronormative and non-heteronormative, suggests Pomerance, leave the relationship open to interpretation as the viewer prefers.

The final chapter of the book – “This ain’t about your money, bro. Your boy gave you up”: Bromance and Breakup in HBO’s *The Wire*” – looks at the dynamics of male friendship and intimacy that characterise the TV series. In a show that consistently marginalises women and female-centred stories, author Dominic Lennard argues how male friendships and homosocial intimacies are favoured, with homophobic rhetoric employed as a bonding strategy in a hyper-masculinised environment that denies its subjects the language in which to articulate their mutual attraction.

This edited collection provides a comprehensive critique of the cultural phenomenon of bromance. It charts the development of key bromantic tropes, such as the privileging of a male intimacy that must be disavowed in its sexual form and homosocial
immaturity, across a variety of film genres, scrutinising developments in Hollywood and world cinema and analysing depictions of bromantic dynamics in US TV. Asking as many questions as it answers, the book throws open to debate the possible pleasures available through bromance with its potential, too often contained, for undermining heteronormative modes of representation. [End Page 4]

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July 15th, 2016 |

Review by María T. Ramos-García

Over the last few years, we have witnessed the publication of masses of books on the Twilight Saga, some addressed to the general public, others geared toward an academic audience (for example, Twilight and Philosophy: Vampires, Vegetarians, and the Pursuit of Immortality; The Twilight Mystique: Critical Essays on the Novels and Films; The Twilight Saga: Exploring the Global Phenomenon, Twilight and History among others). In The Twilight of the Gothic? Vampire Fiction and Rise of Paranormal Romance, Joseph Crawford tries to offer a more comprehensive perspective on the ascent of the paranormal romance in the twenty-first century, a goal he only partially achieves.

The title prefigures the tension between the conflicting focuses that vie for the author’s attention, and that results in a very informative and valuable book for paranormal romance studies, but not the groundbreaking holistic interpretation of the genre that, as a scholar, I was hoping for. The word play on the first part of the title indicates its focus on the Twilight Saga, as well as the generic point of departure for the study: the Gothic, Crawford’s area of expertise, and the topic of much of his previous critical production, especially his previous book Gothic Fiction and the Invention of Terrorism: The Politics and Aesthetics of Fear in the Age of the Reign of Terror (2013). The second part of the title shows a duality that is not easy to reconcile: vampire fiction and paranormal romance are very different categories. There is a lot of vampire fiction that is not romance, and paranormal romance, although it often includes vampires, is rarely about vampires alone.

The brief introduction is very promising. Beginning with a personal anecdote about a graduate student reading group of popular fiction, he points out the negative and visceral reactions that Twilight awoke among sophisticated readers interested in other popular genres, regardless of their “literary value”. He insightfully observes that “[c]learly the Twilight books had accomplished something, something that strongly appealed to an extremely wide contemporary audience: no author sells over 100 million books by accident.” (3, emphasis in the original). He compares the saga’s success to that of the Harry Potter series, which was largely positively received, and concludes that “the much more heavily contested success of Twilight, which can count both its fans and its detractors by the tens of millions, points to its position astride a major fault line in contemporary culture.” (3). Crawford’s reading of the controversy surrounding Stephenie Meyer’s books is right on target, but it is in the framing of the saga that his argument becomes murky. On page four he establishes a cause and effect relationship between the success of Twilight and the rise of the genre “sometimes labelled ‘paranormal romance’ and sometimes ‘dark fantasy’, but always awash with novels featuring red, white and black covers” (4). Crawford establishes a periodization in which he considers a pre-history of the genre in the 1970s and 1980s (where vampires are portrayed as more humanized), a consolidation between 1989 and 2001 (the emergence of vampires appearing as love interests), and a generic maturity between 2002 and 2005 (the year of publication of the first Twilight installment). However, on page eight, he considers 2000-2008 “the crucial years . . . in which the paranormal romance moved from being an obscure subgenre to an extremely popular (and extremely controversial) form of mainstream fiction”. The implicit tension in Crawford’s periodization, where “generic maturity” precedes (rather than coincides with) mainstream success, reflects Crawford’s oscillation between an interpretation in which Twilight is at the center of the paranormal phenomenon, and another in which the saga is just the most popular manifestation of an ongoing trend in which it is somehow an outlier. Twilight does not imitate other books already being published (Stephenie Meyer has been very outspoken about the fact that she does not read paranormal romance herself) but it has definitely captured an existing zeitgeist. On the other hand, it boosted the visibility and sales of a genre that was already growing and developing a significant readership at the time. In fact, as Crawford admits later in the book, many of the most enthusiastic Twilight fans do not enjoy other paranormal romance authors. Crawford’s reluctant acknowledgement of and dismissiveness towards these other authors provides a skewed perspective of the evolution of the genre.

Most relevant for the readers of this journal is Crawford’s overly superficial treatment of generic issues. After dismissing Pamela Regis’ definition of the romance novel as ahistorical, and the RWA’s definition of the genre as too restrictive, he makes a generic distinction between novels that would be strictly paranormal romance (here defined as “[a] work that tells the story of the development and consummation of a positive, loving romantic relationship between a human and a vampire”) and those that also include “mystery and action adventure storylines” (9). His example of the first kind is Lori Herter’s De Morrisey series (1991-1993), while his examples of the second kind all fall into what most publishers, readers, and critics would consider urban fantasy, a term that Crawford uses later in the book but that is not mentioned in the introduction. The problem with this definition of genre is that Herter’s novels are an early example whose lack of real conflict actually make them generic outliers. According to this clear-cut distinction between paranormal romance and urban fantasy, virtually no paranormal novels published since 2000 could be considered strictly romance because even those that end each novel with the ‘happily ever after’ (HEA) of a new couple include “mystery and action storylines” that occupy a large percentage of the text and are essential to the world-building and reading experience.

Chapter 1, “The First 800 years”, begins with the use of the term romance meaning a text written in a Romance language as opposed to Latin, and its early use as a narrative form of fantasy and adventure versus the more realistic genre of the novel. Crawford then [End Page 2] moves to the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe and the romance novels of Jane Austen, introducing one of his major arguments: that both genres came from the same origins, and both converge again in the paranormal romance of today. He also argues that the Byronic hero is another unifying element of both romance and the Gothic that manifests itself in the paranormal romance, in which the supernatural character of the hero exacerbates the Byronic elements of the alpha-male. This chapter touches on all the mandatory canonical texts, from Jane Eyre (1847) to
This attitude may help explain the fact that he draws a direct line from the early 1990s through Feehan and Harris straight to general and the paranormal romance in particular, even if he never quite displays the contempt of other critics of the genre. Linsay Sands, Lynn Viehl or Kerrilyn Sparks (to name a few of the authors that were publishing paranormal by 2007 and are Kenyon, and Jane Ann Krentz are mentioned little more, and authors such as Gena Showalter, Nalini Singh, Katie McAlister, Harrison, Richelle Mead, and Carrie Vaughn are barely mentioned. J. R. Ward, Jeaniene Frost, Tanya Huff, Sherrilyn most of the bestseller paranormal authors of the twenty-first century. Authors such as Patricia Briggs, Kresley Cole, Kim There is also a lack of explicit criteria in the selection of authors and texts included in the analysis. Crawford glosses over the protagonists in paranormal romance that take place, although at the beginning of the series include some humans, are mostly among dark-hunters, considered similar since they cannot withstand sunlight and live off human souls—not blood), but the characters and pairing achieves her HEA with a shapeshifter. In Sherrilyn Kenyon’s world, there are no actual vampires (although daemons can be mentioned a few examples, in J.R. Ward’s "Vampire" (9). This definition grossly simplifies the complex and varied pairings that are created in these texts. Just to mention a few examples, in J.R. Ward’s "Black Dagger Brotherhood" series (1993-1996), as well as Harlequin Mills & Boon’s first attempt at publishing a paranormal line, Silhouette Shadows, from 1993 to 1996. He also establishes a parallel with changes to vampire films in the 1990s, especially Coppola’s "Bram Stoker’s Dracula" (1992), as well as other influential paranormal box office successes of the period, such a Ghost (1990) or Angel for Hire (1991). While again, his focus is on the vampire, Crawford’s examples also include werewolves, witches, ghosts and other paranormal characters and themes. The last part of the chapter is devoted to the rise of the young adult paranormal romance, especially Annette Curtis Klaus and L. J. Smith. This analysis is continued in Chapter 3 “Sleeping with the Enemy”, which includes an extensive analysis of Hamilton’s Anita Blake series (one of the early urban fantasy series, starting in 1993) and Whedon’s Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003) and Angel (1999-2004) TV series. Crawford admits that Hamilton’s series, which was still going in 2014, has undergone a very drastic and unique evolution unusual for the genre, but there is no doubt that it is a major milestone in the development of the paranormal. That is the case even more so in the two TV series, especially Buffy, which was undoubtedly a major influence that reached a much larger audience than the early novels ever could.

Chapter 4, “The New Millenium” begins with an analysis of Christine Feehan’s Carpathian Series (1999-) and Charlaine Harris’ Sookie Stackhouse (2001-2013). Crawford’s discomfort with the romance makes its first appearance here. It becomes evident that his analysis is much more insightful when it comes to Harris’ series (usually classified as urban fantasy) than Feehan’s (definitely romance). However, after a few pages on each author, the largest part of the chapter is devoted to the Twilight saga, which is also the subject of the entire next chapter, appropriately entitled “The Twilight Controversy”. Contrary to the author’s discomfort with the previous texts, his analysis of Twilight shows significantly more enthusiasm for the subject, and provides a great synthesis of criticism (scholarly and otherwise) on the bestseller collection. One of the most provocative ideas in the book is its analysis of the “cultural fault line” that reactions to Twilight bring to the forefront. Crawford points out that while supporters of the saga are reading the characters’ actions within the framework of the genre—and therefore not necessarily as models of real-life behavior—its detractors are not utilizing those generic conventions and therefore consider the characters as dangerous role models for readers who, in their view, don’t know any better. Ideologically, he points out how the text is multi-vocal, so while it touches on potentially controversial topics such as marriage, abortion, and premarital sex, it is easy to read Twilight as advocating opposing ideologies, if the reader chooses to ignore its tensions and contradictions.

Reading Crawford’s book, one might think that Twilight is both the highlight and culmination of the paranormal romance, because the sixth and last chapter, “Mutations”, is devoted almost exclusively to film and television adaptations of previously published paranormal romances, especially the films based on the Twilight series and the television series True Blood (2008-2014), based on Harris’ Sookie Stackhouse, and L. J. Smith’s Vampire Diaries (2009-). These visual versions are what the author considers in his epilogue the manifestation of the “maturity of the genre” (271); a genre that in his opinion is in decadence—at least in its form as a novel. His evidence for this conclusion again shows the problems inherent in his equating of paranormal with vampires; Roxanne Longstreet, who publishes a young adult paranormal series as Rachel Caine, told Crawford that “most editors in traditional publishing that I’ve spoken to are no longer seeking vampire-themed material” (271), which Crawford takes to be evidence that paranormal fiction on the whole is past its prime. Yet a quick look at two of the most successful authors in the 2014 New York Times Best Sellers list confirms that J. R. Ward had two number one bestsellers, one of them in her Black Dagger Brotherhood series, in which vampires are the protagonists, and one featuring other paranormal beings, while Patricia Briggs (who writes paranormals without vampires) also had a number one bestseller. There simply is not evidence that if vampires are not in, paranormal is out.

The alternating definition of vampire romance at some times and paranormal romance at other times is one of the methodological problems of Crawford’s book. It is debatable whether such a distinction can even be made, since virtually all series combine an ever-increasing array of paranormal beings, of which vampires are only one. However, his initial definition of paranormal romance in the introduction only included “a loving romantic relationship between a human and a vampire” (9). This definition grossly simplifies the concept and varied pairings that are created in these texts. Just to mention a few examples, in J.R. Ward’s The Black Dagger Brotherhood most pairings are among vampires, and those initially human turn out to not be really humans or change into something else as a ghost before their HEA. In other series, such as Sookie Stackhouse, although vampires are the first supernatural species the reader learns about, all kinds of shapeshifters, and even demons make an appearance. Even the protagonist, as we eventually learn, is part fairy and achieves her HEA with a shapeshifter. In Sherrilyn Kenyon’s world, there are no actual vampires (although daemons can be considered similar since they cannot withstand sunlight and live off human souls—not blood), but the characters and pairing that take place, although at the beginning of the series include some humans, are mostly among dark-hunters, shapeshifters, gods and goddesses of varied mythologies, dream-hunters and other supernatural beings. In fact, paranormal romance (End Page 4) sometimes even pushes the boundaries of heteronormativity (a homosexual couple are the protagonists in Lover at Last (2013) by J. R. Ward, and in Lynn Viehl’s Dreamweaver (2010) the HEA is between a woman and two men).

There is also a lack of explicit criteria in the selection of authors and texts included in the analysis. Crawford glosses over most of the bestseller paranormal authors of the twenty-first century. Authors such as Patricia Briggs, Kresley Cole, Kim Harrison, Richelle Mead, and Carrie Vaughn are barely mentioned. J. R. Ward, Jeaniene Frost, Tanya Huff, Sherrilyn Kenyon, and Jane Ann Krentz are mentioned little more, and authors such as Gena Showalter, Nalini Singh, Katie McAlister, Linsay Sands, Lynn Viehl or Kerrilyn Sparks (to name a few of the authors that were publishing paranormal by 2007 and are still publishing today) are not included at all. Crawford also displays a certain tone of condescension towards romance in general and the paranormal romance in particular, even if he never quite displays the contempt of other critics of the genre. This attitude may help explain the fact that he draws a direct line from the early 1990s through Feehan and Harris straight to
Meyer, and then describes a supposed decline of the genre, which in his view survives only in film and television. Crawford also ignores the historical context in which the genre developed; while he includes historical interpretations of earlier texts, no socio-historical contextualization is given for newer texts.

In spite of the major gaps outlined above, overall, Joseph Crawford's book is well-written and informative. He pulls together valuable information and creates a genealogy that includes both the Gothic and the romance strands which converge in the paranormal romance, and proffers some provocative interpretations of this connection. The book is strong in the areas the author is familiar with (the Gothic, Twilight, and the television programmes and films he analyzes) and his description of the trajectory of the paranormal from Ann Rice to the romances of the 1990s is the best and most complete that I have yet seen. However, while the book covers the years 1990-2000 reasonably well, it is definitely not a study of the paranormal romance in the twenty-first century, as the title (which states the years 1990-2012 as the period being analyzed) seemingly indicates. If the reader keeps in mind the limitations in its scope, Crawford's new book is a valuable contribution worth reading for anyone interested in this genre. [End Page 5]

Works Cited


[End Page 6]