



Frantz, Sarah S. G. and Eric Murphy Selinger, eds. *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays*. Pp. 275. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2012. US \$40 (paper). ISBN: 978-0786441907.

Review by Kay Mussell

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This comprehensive collection of original essays on popular romance fiction delivers on the promise of its title. The succinct and insightful introductory essay by co-editors Frantz and Selinger is the best survey and analysis to date of how the study of popular romance has developed and evolved. Keenly aware of the politics of romance criticism, the editors synthesize four decades of romance scholarship in terms of the scholarly contexts from which previous critics wrote while also charting an ambitious course for the future of the field. The seventeen essays in the collection are divided into four thematic sections: “Close Reading the Romance”, “Convention and Originality”, “Love and Strife”, and “Readers, Authors, Communities”. These essential essays demonstrate the rich variety of current approaches from multiple perspectives. Both challenging and building on previous scholarship, the collection posits an expansion of subject matter, promotes innovative modes of analysis, and offers myriad new and updated questions for future scholars to pursue.

Romance criticism has long been problematic, primarily because of pervasive, often simplistic, assumptions about popular romance fiction held by scholars and critics as well as the literary community at large. Some of the common tropes – that romances are all alike, that they are a form of debased literature, that they are bad (or good) for readers, that they border on soft porn, that romance heroines lack agency, that they promote male hegemony – have shaped and limited the kinds of questions scholars pose and the conclusions they draw. These assumptions have often led to studies that portray romances as monolithically formulaic and, ironically, that favor analysis of romances in cultural context rather than as works deserving of aesthetic analysis. Although this collection is not the first scholarly attempt to break through these simplistic assumptions, the richness and variety of its essays moves the argument along with complexity and promise. These authors write with the understanding of the importance and the significance of their subject and they offer no apologies for popular romance or for their interest in it.

While much romance scholarship in the past has taken multiple authors and novels as its subject, often leading to overgeneralized conclusions about “the romance”, the essays in the collection’s first section treat the works as texts worthy of the same aesthetic and textual consideration that is conventionally given to more “canonical” literature. Part 1, “Close Reading the Romance”, demonstrates the value of single-novel critiques through four case studies of popular romances that are quite different from one another. In “Bertrice teaches you about history, and you don’t even mind!’: History and Revisionist Historiography in Bertrice Small’s *The Kadin*”, Hsu-Ming Teo explores the uses of history in a novel that is partially based on fact yet re-interprets conventional historiographical accounts to privilege a heroine and her romantic relationships over the conventional narrative centered on politics and empire. Eric Murphy Selinger’s essay, “How to Read a Romance Novel (and Fall in Love with Popular Romance)”, is a classic close reading of an individual novel, and the essay richly repays his approach. Examining Laura Kinsale’s 1992 novel *Flowers from the Storm*, Selinger deftly demonstrates Kinsale’s often playful and self-reflexive “commentary” on romance conventions as well as the “geometric” qualities of the text and the allusions to Milton that define the moral world of the fiction; New Critics should applaud. “‘How we love is our soul’: Joey W. Hill’s BDSM Romance *Holding the Cards*” by Sarah S. G. Frantz takes on the male dominant/female submissive (BDSM) subgenre in which the sexual and erotic relationship is central to character development as well as to the narrative. Her analysis goes beyond questions about whether romances are soft porn to posit the meaning of portrayals of sexuality in terms of romance conventions. The line of inquiry she is pursuing could well illuminate the astounding “Fifty Shades of Grey” phenomenon. Mary Bly’s “On Popular Romance, J. R. Ward, and the Limits of Genre Study” argues that “the key to understanding genre novels...is to be found in study of the parts, not the framework” (64). Trying to analyze the popular romance as a whole has led feminist scholars to work through a lens of conflict between feminism and patriarchy which is not in itself irrelevant, but is ultimately limiting in that the significance of authorial creativity is devalued and often missed. This section of the collection offers potential for expansion of close readings of individual novels chosen to cover a broader spectrum of romance.

Part 2, “Convention and Originality”, builds on the aesthetic approach of Selinger and Bly by exploring the links between romance as a genre and romance novels as individual works. These essays work against the common assumption by those outside the field that romances are formulaic and therefore lack originality. They demonstrate the variety of works covered by the romance umbrella and explore their relationships to other literary forms. An Goris’s “Loving by the Book: Voice and Romance Authorship” examines manuals for aspiring romance writers in terms of their presentation of romance conventions and their paradoxical demand that authors find their own Voice. The traditional advice for potential authors helps to delineate the self-perception of the romance as understood by practitioners and also to chart the relationship between convention and innovation. “The ‘Managing Female’ in the Novels of Georgette Heyer” by K. Elizabeth Spillman challenges the notion that romance heroines lack agency through a comparison of three Heyer novels featuring quite different protagonists who define their own ways in the worlds in which they live; indeed, a key feature of Heyer’s popularity is her somewhat ironic view of romance convention. Laura Vivanco’s “One Ring to Bind Them: Ring Symbolism in Popular Romance Fiction” explores a variety of ways in which rings and the imagery of rings function in romance. “The More the Merrier:

Transformations of the Love Triangle Across the Romance” by Carole Veldman-Genz builds on theoretical constructs from Rene Girard and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to explore the trope of the love triangle in popular romance. Veldman-Genz incorporates fictions of homosociality as well as the more usual female/male/female and male/female/male triangles. Like the previous essays by Frantz and Bly in part 1, Deborah Kaplan’s “Why would any woman want to read such stories?: The Distinction Between Genre Romances and Slash Fiction” draws useful contrasts between the category romance as exemplified by Harlequin Mills & Boon and slash, which is fan fiction featuring same-sex couples. While some critics have seen slash as a sub-genre of romance, Kaplan demonstrates the ways in which romance and slash are more fruitfully seen as distinct genres interacting with one another in creative and productive ways. Kaplan’s essay suggests a potential model for similar studies of interactions between popular romance and other genre fiction.

Part 3, “Love and Strife,” focuses on redefining a set of common tropes and themes regarding war, conflict, captivity, pain, and healing. The opening essay, “Borderlands of Desire: Captivity, Romance, and the Revolutionary Power of Love” by Robin Harders, examines

[the] literary link between the wildly popular genres of Anglo-American Indian captivity narratives and romance, a relationship that tracks into and through sentimental and sensational fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, across the ocean between England and America, and over numerous cultural assumptions about the superiority of Anglo-American patriarchy. (133)

She argues, through close readings, that early captivity narratives and more recent novels featuring heroines and sheiks mirror one another in their focus on mediating encounters with “the other” in the context of romance. Thus, both genres have the potential to subvert conventional patriarchy. Jayashree Kamble, in “Patriotism, Passion, and PTSD: The Critique of War in Popular Romance Fiction”, describes a type of romance in which the “warrior hero” is damaged by the hyper-masculine world of war. These potentially subversive novels suggest that war undermines domestic happiness and asks too much of those who fight them. Kathleen Therrien’s “Straight to the Edges: Gay and Lesbian Characters and Cultural Conflict in Popular Romance Fiction” charts a variety of portrayals of gay and lesbian characters playing both negative and positive roles in the narrative. The increasing number of gay-positive characters is an emerging marker of social change. Finally, “‘You call me a bitch like that’s a bad thing’: Romance Criticism and Redefining the Word ‘Bitch’” by Sarah Wendell, one of the founders of the website *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*, attempts to re-define and re-claim the word “bitch” as used on the review blog.

Part 4, “Readers, Authors, Communities,” takes as its concern the often erroneous and condescending views of romance readers. The section opens with Miriam Greenfeld-Benovitz’s “The Interactive Romance Community: The Case of ‘Covers Gone Wild’”. This case study of an interactive “conversation” on the *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* website draws on readers’ comments on outrageous romance cover art and provides a valuable study of how readers interact with one another in discussing the genre. Glen Thomas’s “Happy Returns or Sad Ones? Romance Fiction and the Problem of the Media Effects Model” argues that asking questions about the effect of romances on readers is not as useful as

seeing romances as a creative industry based on acts of consumption. Tamara Whyte, in “‘A consummation devoutly to be wished’: Shakespeare in Popular Historical Romance Fiction”, shows how romance authors use references to Shakespeare to suggest that popular romances partake of “high culture”, offer a game of recognition within the novel, and give readers a sense of superiority and inclusion in literature. Christina A. Valeo, in “The Power of Three: Nora Roberts and Serial Magic”, evaluates readers’ pleasure in Roberts’s typical linked romances. Because romances conventionally end with the culmination of one romance after which protagonists are rarely encountered again, readers may want to know more about characters they have enjoyed. Roberts and others provide that extra pleasure by giving secondary characters their own romantic story while bringing back happily married protagonists from previous books.

Because of limits on length for individual contributions, essay collections are frequently more suggestive of academic trends than of fully developed explanatory paradigms. This fact, however, does not diminish their value. Collections might well be evaluated primarily on their range and potential influence. By those criteria, this collection succeeds brilliantly. Not all of the essays in the collection are as well developed and as suggestive of new strategies as those by Selinger, Frantz, Bly, Goris, Kaplan, Harders, Therrien and Thomas, but they all contribute to a broader sense of the vitality and potential of the burgeoning field of popular romance studies.