

Ali, Kecia. *Human in Death: Morality and Mortality in J. D. Robb's Novels*. Pp. 206. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017. US \$29.95 (hardcover). ISBN: 9781481306270.

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The importance of Nora Roberts to the popular romance genre and, in fact, to the publishing industry, can hardly be overstated. She published her first romance with Harlequin in 1975. She has since published over 215 books. Her every release in the past nineteen years has hit the *New York Times* bestseller list. Justifiably famous for her prolificness – she still averages five books a year – Roberts is also recognized as a genre leader in popular romance.

Roberts is widely credited with either pioneering or being at the forefront of many significant changes in the genre over the past four decades including narrative serialization, incorporation of genre elements outside romance (genre hybridization), writing stronger, older, and more sexually experienced heroines who have professional identities, and writing from the male protagonist's point of view, among many others. In the mid-1990s, Roberts was frustrated with her publisher's plan to release a trilogy in annual installments to avoid overexposure. Roberts demurred at first when her agent suggested that she publish some books under a pseudonym as a way to capitalize on her fast writing pace without saturating the market. Eventually, accepting that "It's marketing ... I could be two popular brands," she consented (Charles). That second brand, J. D. Robb, is the subject of Kecia Ali's 2017 book, *Human in Death: Morality and Mortality in J. D. Robb's Novels*.

Naked in Death (1995) introduced New York Police and Security Department Lieutenant Eve Dallas, her lover, billionaire entrepreneur Roarke, and their mid-twenty-first century world. A generic fusion that incorporates elements of romance, suspense, and police procedural, with a dash of science fiction, each installment is a self-contained crime story that also explores the relationship between the two central protagonists. The first few books focused on Eve and Roarke's initial courtship and marriage, and their relationship remains the emotional core of the series, but the romance plot and suspense plots have tended to share the stage in subsequent installments. January 2018 saw the publication of *Dark in Death*, the 46th book in the series, which remains as popular as ever among readers, even as the publishing space for similar stories is increasingly crowded.

Roberts has achieved a high level of cultural visibility and appreciation for her work ethic, her ability to sell books, her relationship with her fans, and her support of the popular romance industry. However, her books and her writing have received less attention, even among popular romance scholars. As popular romance studies has developed in the past few decades, it has moved away from a generalizing approach and towards a differential approach, which analyzes not the entire genre, but individual, intentionally selected texts in thematic groups or in isolation (Goris “Matricide in Romance Scholarship?”). Even so, there remain few studies that focus on Roberts (but see works by Regis, and Goris “Mind, Body, Love”) and almost no work on Roberts writing as J.D. Robb (see Mayangasari and Swaminathan for exceptions). While the In Death series is not a romance series (that would require a complete courtship plot in each installment), it is built around a central romantic relationship, and it is written by the most prodigious, best-selling, and most celebrated romance author of the past thirty plus years which makes it worthy of attention. For these reasons, Ali’s book-length study of the In Death series represents an important milestone in popular romance studies.

Observing that all literature grapples with the human condition, Ali explores those aspects of humanity that seem to her most salient in Robb’s work. Since no one book could cover everything interesting about Robb’s writing, the decision to anchor *Human in Death* in, first, a vision of the human, provides focus and coherence. Taking her cue from the specific literary genres combined in the In Death series, Ali narrows her scope even further to concentrate on justice, law, and retribution (police procedural), class, race, and technology (speculative fiction), and social norms around masculinity, femininity, and relationships (romance). Chapters are organized topically around five themes: intimacy, friendship, vocation, violence, and perfection.

Noting that “Critical engagement, not condemnation, is my task” (Loc. 71), Ali teases out the vision of human good that the In Death series promotes, as well as its omissions and silences. An important theme throughout is the centrality of the romantic relationship between Eve and Roarke, and how this is intertwined with the suspense plot and police procedural. Where more casual readers, or scholars focusing on one or a few books might focus on continuities across books, Ali’s comprehensive study demonstrates how the relationships, characters, and plots have changed and evolved over time, an incredibly valuable perspective on such a long-running series. *Human in Death* offers a compelling model for analyzing not only long-running series, but the way writers deploy romance genre elements beyond the constraints of the genre itself, and what happens when they do. Ali’s central argument is that Robb’s futuristic New York and the characters within it reflects both the problems and promise of the current social reality. It is at once economically just, egalitarian, tolerant, and multicultural and beset by poverty, violence, political strife, and prejudice.

Ali, Professor of Religion at Boston University and a noted scholar in her home fields of Islamic Jurisprudence and Women in Early and Modern Islam, marries a fan’s enthusiasm for and detailed knowledge of the study texts with a scholar’s ability to reflect conceptually on them, teasing out themes, noticing omissions, and connecting these observations to the relevant scholarly literature. In each chapter, Ali displays a sure command of Robb’s oeuvre, of relevant popular romance scholarship, and of contemporary debates among readers. She avoids both dense academic jargon and fannish minutia, creating an accessible text for educated lay readers and a compelling one for scholars of popular romance fiction who do

not share her encyclopedic knowledge of all 15,000 or so pages of the In Death books. The endnotes more directly address scholarly and theoretical concerns than the main text, and I sometimes wished that material was brought into the main text. That said, Ali's approach makes for a smoothly readable book.

Ali's first chapter, "Intimacy in Death" explores Roarke and Eve's relationship to generate claims about the vision of the good life Robb's series promotes. Since all of the chapters follow this pattern, I will summarize this one in some detail. Ali relies on copious, but smoothly integrated, textual evidence to illustrate the ways Robb blends and manages diverse genre requirements. She writes:

The commingling of sex and violence echoes the series' genre blending. In addition to setting the stage for this brave new world, the first novels in the series interweave a courtship plot with the procedural. Both have their own logics and narrative conventions. (Loc. 141-143)

For example, the murder plot brings Eve and Roarke together as cop and suspect, while also throwing up an obvious barrier to their mutual attraction. The traumatic past that closes Eve off emotionally from intimacy also fuels her thirst for justice and her determined pursuit of criminals, often at great personal cost. And Roarke's underworld connections and unorthodox investigative techniques make him a powerful ally, but dangerous lover.

In the latter part of this chapter, Ali teases out the many factors that support egalitarianism and gender role reversals in Eve and Roarke's relationship. Roarke is more caring and open, while Eve is more guarded, so their characters generate a switch of stereotypical caretaking roles. The police procedural plot, with Eve as the cop, influences the series' focus on her career as opposed to Roarke's. The suspense aspects, and the constant danger they present to Eve and Roarke, make a child-free lifestyle a fitting one for them, which contributes to a more egalitarian domestic life. Ali also notes the way the earlier books hew more closely certain romance genre conventions, with Roarke as the pursuer in the relationship sometimes acting in ways that invade her privacy and her boundaries. Robb does stick to other romance conventions throughout the series: Roarke is taller and more physically assertive than Eve, and so wealthy that her refusal to conform to stereotypical conceptions of wifely duties is smoothed over by human and droid servants. Finally, Ali explores the wider circle of intimates orbiting around the main characters. The series, in sum, "shows the value of interdependence, the crucial importance of caring work, and the inevitability of vulnerability" (Loc. 432). Ali concludes by observing that Roarke and Eve's interdependence and working partnership create a solid foundation for intimacy in other relationships, which provides a smooth segue into the next chapter, "Friendship in Death."

While building a picture of the good life for humans that emerges from a close reading of the entire In Death series, Ali notices, in a fascinating chapter called "Perfectionism in Death", problematic assumptions and gaps, including ableism, a view of the good life in which disabled individuals are marginalized. Similarly, Ali notes that while Robb often mentions race, the author fails to integrate structural racism into her near-future New York City, which is presented as "free of anti-black racism" without explanation (Loc. 674; 1978). Ali points out, for example, that Robb tends to mention race when the character is non-white, with the result that "whiteness goes mostly unspoken" (Loc. 667). Ali also critiques the "unrelieved whiteness" of Dallas's close friends (Loc. 692). In an especially compelling section, she

explores the sole recurring black character, Crack, as a window into the series' relationship to race. A club owner, Crack is "relentlessly embodied" (Loc. 743), and while his name is meant to refer to his physical strength, the "allusion to crack cocaine, scourge of the inner cities, is unmistakable" (Loc. 758).[1]

At times, Ali's critique doesn't go far enough for this reviewer, for example when she quotes without comment Dallas's assertion that "all deaths matter" (Loc. 2022) and that "Murder...harbored no bigotry, no bias" (Loc. 2007). These echo a little too closely the slogan "all lives matter," a rhetorical move that diverts discussion of police brutality away from the lived experience of black people and away from systematic racism. This is surprising given that in the preface Ali shares that the exoneration of Officer Darren Wilson for the murder of Michael Brown led directly to the addition of a chapter on violence in the book (Loc. 69). While *police* violence is a relatively rare occurrence in the In Death series, Dallas's way of describing murder serves to deflect from the disproportionate and unjust burden of violence borne by people of color in the United States. The issues of race and police brutality are treated by Ali in separate chapters, but connecting them more explicitly might have generated some additional interesting insights.

While all scholarly work reveals something about the scholar, being a fan implies voluntary engagement with and enjoyment of the study texts. Far from rendering her analysis suspect, Ali's status as a fan opens an additional avenue of inquiry and insight. She questions how to read the books in an ethical way, which, she asserts, requires thoughtful consideration of not only problematic aspects of Robb's books, but also of gaps in the reader's (including her own) patterns of attention. While the series may paint a picture of a kind of life worth living – one that includes loving intimacy, friendships, and a vocation – uptake requires reader responsiveness. Readers' critical engagement can allow them to take transferable lessons from Robb's work: "If imagination is part of the writer's toolkit for social transformation, the reader's more modest but also powerful tool is thoughtfulness" (Loc. 2511-2512). On the other hand, while vigorously defending the claim that, "critical reflection need not oppose appreciation; it can enhance enjoyment," (Loc. 111) Ali does not explore the possibility that for some readers, problematic aspects unearthed by critical reflection can not only dampen enthusiasm, but create an internal conflict that forces a choice between a reader's pleasure and her moral integrity.

Human in Death should appeal to fans of the series, popular romance scholars, and philosophers interested in ethical criticism. It works best as a generous, intelligent, and occasionally tough-minded exploration for series readers, much more ambitious, and demanding, than typical companion books full of trivia, interviews, and pop quizzes. It should also be easily accessible for undergraduates, and at about \$30 for the hardcover edition (a bit less for the digital version), the cost is very reasonable. It could be used in a course that includes critique of contemporary literature generally, or popular romance fiction, police procedurals, or suspense specifically. It is not necessary to have read any of Robb's books to appreciate Ali's insights, although that would obviously enhance a student's ability to engage with them. Any chapter of *Human in Death* could be chosen, or indeed the whole book could be used for a course on fiction and philosophy that includes a unit on morality. Specific chapters could be studied in a criminology and literature course, a sociology of violence course, or a professionalism or professional ethics course.

Ali is modest about her aims in *Human In Death*, which she describes as a form of "thoughtful engagement with fictive worlds," a prelude to the "essential work" of cultivating

a more just world (Loc. 2517). In the preface, Ali indicates that the project began as “a relatively lighthearted little book,” and, while current events led her to delve into darker themes, with only 100 pages of text, it remains short for a monograph (Loc. 69). Ali encourages readers to explore sources cited in her 100 pages of endnotes, and hopes *Human in Death* will help stimulate work on aspects of Robb’s oeuvre that she doesn’t cover at all: parenting, technology, and the global political order.

With respect to ethical criticism, Ali remains at the level of assumed shared understandings of common morality, leaving room for a study of the In Death series like *The Wisdom of Harry Potter: What Our Favorite Hero Teaches Us about Moral Choices*. In that book, Edmund M. Kern probes the moral universe of J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series via an explicit articulation of Stoicism. Books such as *The Politics of Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games and Philosophy* provide insights into source texts in the service of teaching key concepts in political science and philosophy, respectively, and a volume on Robb’s work in this vein would not go amiss. Her comments about reader responsibility are confined to the introduction and conclusion, inviting more detailed consideration, especially since such discussions still tend to frame the reader as passively affected rather than actively engaged. And, in terms of popular romance studies, I think some of Ali’s observations suggest fruitful dialogues between the In Death series and An Gori’s work on serialization (“Happily Ever After...and After”; see also Valeo), Roach’s work on the aca-fan-subject position, work in disability studies and romance (for example, Mills, Baldys, Cheyne, and Schalk), and, of course, work in race, gender and ethnicity in romance (such as Taylor, Teo, Kamblé, and Burge). In short, *Human in Death* raises more questions than it aims to answer, providing an excellent methodological model and example for pursuing them.

[1] It’s worth noting in this context that the phrase “inner city”, while it continues to be used in the scholarly literature, is considered by some to be problematic. See Axel-Lute for an accessible explanation.

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