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Review by Annie Brancky

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Despite persistent critical disapproval, the mass-market romance has tenaciously remained one of the most popular literary genres of the last century. Its overwhelmingly female authorship and readership make the romance novel an ideal compass by which to trace real women's concerns and imaginations over the last hundred years. In her clear and compact study, *Romance and Readership in Twentieth-Century France: Love Stories*, Diana Holmes examines the development and endurance of popular romance in France from the Belle Époque to the post-modern age. From the serial novels of the early part of the century to Harlequin romances, from Georges Sand to Marie Cardinal, from conservative, moralizing love stories to lesbian popular romance, the author considers a wide array of works that speak to and about women's desires. Holmes explores mass-market romance as a site in which woman writers and readers can communicate their desires, concerns, fantasies, and complicated senses of identity.

"Why, exactly, is romance a genre favored by women writers," Holmes asks near the start of her study, "and what pleasures does it provide that explain its persistent popularity with readers?" (2). Why do women today continue to author and consume the same types of novels that women adored over a hundred years ago? One reason might be that women's lives have not, in practice, experienced the metamorphoses that social and political changes have purported to bring; as Holmes observes, even as prevailing ideologies evolve, "it takes time for social change (for example economic and legal reforms) to translate into the intimacy of family relationships" (14). But the importance of the mass-market romance may also lie, the critic argues, precisely in the success it continues to enjoy *despite* dramatic achievements in women's rights and personal independence over the century. Developments in the social, cultural, and material circumstances of women's lives may explain the growing popularity of new variations on the romance genre that resonate more closely with modern women, yet women also continue to love romance novels that

represent social and emotional circumstances that no longer reflect their present reality. Why do contemporary, independent women continue to turn to stories that center on love and the couple?

To respond, Holmes engages the ideas of such feminist theorists as Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin, the psychoanalytical arguments of Freud, and the sociological explanations of Pierre Bourdieu among many others. In her first chapter, she mobilizes a psychoanalytical perspective to look at the impact of early childhood fantasies and experiences (the oedipal drama, infantile bisexuality, separation from the mother) on adult desires. By considering Freud's theories on the formation of gender identity and sexuality in conjunction with later feminist psychoanalytical approaches to these theories, Holmes concludes that romance novels unite the emotional and erotic quest for personal fulfillment with the desire to find one's place in the social order. "Romance … deals with serious ethical questions: how to reconcile the fierce egoism of sexual and emotional drives with social responsibility, how to negotiate the boundaries between self and other, between loving desire and possessive control, between fascination with and fear of difference" (19). Despite the possible "dangers" to readers of a genre that prioritizes love, the mass-market romance remains "a narrative form chosen by women writers and readers, across classes and across three centuries, not only for its capacity to provide pleasurable fantasy, but also for its ability to reflect and reflect on their lives" (20). In the end, this brief survey of the theories that justify *why* romance continues to attract women raises interesting questions about gender, identity, and literature, but later chapters in which Holmes displays her strengths in literary analysis are more persuasive.

Holmes defines the romance genre as one in which the love plot is central to the narration, which consists of a meeting, a series of obstacles both internal and external to the characters, and a denouement that can be happy (resulting in marriage) or unhappy (resulting in separation). Yet with these consistent elements that define the genre comes great flexibility, and popular romance has been used in France to express a range of disparate political views, social classes, and historical circumstances. During the World Wars, novels by the brother and sister team of Jeanne-Marie and Frédéric Petitjean de la Rosière (commonly called "Delly" novels, after the authors' nom-de-plume) adopted the popular romance structure to endorse and represent conservative, Catholic values that present both gender and class as "God-given" and necessarily intrinsic. Rather than question the social order, these novels reassured woman of the rightness of their own subordination in order to reinforce a traditional society. But the Delly novels, while extremely popular, were not the only voice for women during this turbulent time. Writers like Max de Veuzit and Magali offered women more nuanced novels that reflected their changing world. Their brand of romance, Holmes observes, tended to emphasize the importance of mutual love and marriage between equal partners: a sharply contrasting ideology embodied in the same popular form.

In postwar France, in part due to radical social changes wrought by WWII, such as greater employment opportunities and women's suffrage, writers like Simone de Beauvoir and Françoise Sagan reached large audiences with works that openly questioned the social structures that shaped women's lives. Nevertheless, these novels remained within largely heterosexual romance structures that depicted the conflict between feminine desire and exterior social demands. Holmes' nuanced exploration of these texts and authors exemplifies the flexibility of her approach: on the one hand, all of them reflect the social

tendencies of their historical circumstances, responding to those circumstances with various political and social agendas; on the other hand, they all deploy the basic framework of the romance novel, seeing that framework as the most effective and enduringly attractive means to express women's realities to their readers.

Holmes focuses her study as much on readership as on authorship. She analyzes how changing laws and social practices at the beginning of the century—increased mobility, expansion in publishing, and state education of women, among others—contributed to the development of a body of women readers. Holmes traces the relationship between some of the most significant social and cultural events of the century and the ways in which they shaped literary tastes; for example, the World Wars provided greater independence and employment opportunities for women, successive waves of feminism questioned the patriarchy, existentialism undermined essentialist thinking, and the cultural revolution of '68 overturned the dominant values of stability and consistency. Though she emphasizes these historical events and literature's role in reflecting them, Holmes never underestimates the real, emotional, visceral, and (implicitly or explicitly) erotic pleasure of reading these romances that explains their popularity. "The very structure of the romance lends it erotic potential: the first encounter with the loved one arouses desire; the body of the narrative plays with this desire, in some cases endlessly deferring its satisfaction, in others partially fulfilling and thereby heightening it, until the climax of either perfect union, or loss and separation" (19). Both the content of the romance and the act of reading itself engage the body and the mind of the reader in a sensuous experience that attracts a wide variety of women writers and consumers.

Holmes confronts the criticism that romance promotes the limited and inescapable destiny of becoming a wife, and argues that while this may be true of some romances, many others offer the opportunity for women to explore a utopian, fantasized version of the real situations in which they find themselves. She sees romance as a "woman's story," the "quest for self-discovery and self-affirmation." Indeed, for Holmes, whether it is a conservative Delly romance with a happy ending or one of Françoise Sagan's "anti-romances," "the genre demands some degree of affirmation of female subjectivity and agency" (141). The genre revolves around a woman's conflict and her ability to resolve it, granting her a power in the fictional world that she may not have wielded in the real one. Holmes' positive approach to the genre and her confidence in the value and interest of love stories makes *Romance and Readership in Twentieth-Century France* a compelling contribution to Popular Romance Studies. Whether they are avid romance fans or skeptical critics, readers will get a comprehensive picture of a genre that Holmes moves from the margins to the center of recent French literary history.