

Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *Reading Nora Roberts*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010. 155 pp. \$35.00

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In the landmark 1997 *Paradoxa* special issue on popular romance, Pamela Regis and Kay Mussell both noted that the study of individual romance authors was needed for the further development and consolidation of Popular Romance Studies as a critical field. (Mussell 10, Regis 146) Such single-author studies would effectively counter the stereotype that popular romance fiction is “formulaic” by demonstrating that popular romance, like any other kind of literature, is written by a multitude of individual, markedly different authors, each of whom deserves to be considered as such. Thirteen years later, alas, scholarly work on individual romance authors remains quite rare. Even the oeuvre of an incredibly popular romance author like Nora Roberts—who, with 164 *New York Times* bestsellers to her name and a staggering 400 million copies of her books in print (“Nora Roberts. Did You Know?”), is one of the most read authors worldwide—is discussed in only a handful of scholarly publications. Academic articles which focus exclusively on Roberts’ work are even rarer, and no book-length monograph currently exists, either on Roberts or any other contemporary popular romance author. Given this gap in romance scholarship, I was pleasantly surprised when I learned about the publication of Mary Ellen Snodgrass’ *Reading Nora Roberts* (2010).

Reading Nora Roberts is, however, not the scholarly work the field of Popular Romance Studies needs. In fact, despite Snodgrass’ professorship (proudly announced in the “About the Author” section), *Reading Nora Roberts* is not an academic study at all. Instead, it is a somewhat hastily put together book directed at what seem to be book club readers and, perhaps, interested high school students or entering undergraduates. (That Snodgrass is not addressing peer scholars but casual readers appears in, for example, the “discussion questions” at the end of each chapter, her repeated uncritical use of the term “feminism” without any regard for the complex theoretical debates the concept entails, and the summaries of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* she deems it necessary to provide.)

As a book for a wide but avidly interested audience, *Reading Nora Roberts* aims both to introduce the author and to facilitate discussion of her vast oeuvre. While her discussion

of individual novels demonstrates Snodgrass's skills as a literary scholar—she often displays real insight into Roberts' narratives—the book is ultimately undermined by the critic's apparently haphazard approach to Roberts' oeuvre and the lack of clear direction in her argumentation.

One of the more puzzling aspects to negotiate as a reader of this book is the unexplained differences in the extent of Snodgrass's discussion of Roberts' works. As the critic surveys the course of Roberts's career, in-depth analyses of some novels alternate with all-too-brief and underdeveloped discussions of others, creating a strange imbalance. For example, the chapter on Roberts' work in the 1990s offers a detailed look at *Montana Sky*, but the equally long subsequent chapter on the 2000s consists of far more superficial discussions of five different novels. Snodgrass does not account for her differing approach. The in-depth focus on single novels is to be lauded both as a principle and in Snodgrass' execution; indeed, *Reading Nora Roberts* reaches its most interesting potential when Snodgrass momentarily lets loose her literary analysis skills, as for example when she recasts Serena MacGregor's retaliatory breaking of her father's cigars as a "subtextual Freudian gesture of female violence to phallic symbols" (29), or when she discerns *Sacred Sins*' "basic antithesis" as the "human need and male dread of sentimentality" (39). Unfortunately, Snodgrass does not place these novels within Roberts' oeuvre in any coherent way, and this failure to give a satisfactory account of that oeuvre prevents her from creating the simultaneous sense of overview and depth that she seems to pursue. Although the critic interestingly identifies the presence of numerous socio-cultural themes in some of Roberts' novels, she tends to oversimplify matters by all-too-brief readings, which fail to develop those promising interpretations. Instead, her discussions are often bogged down by lengthy plot summaries, which might please readers completely unfamiliar with Roberts' works but are redundant for the experienced Roberts reader and the interested romance scholar.

Even taking the book on its own terms, as a publication for the general public, the book is ultimately disappointing. Although at times Snodgrass' interpretations display promising potential, overall she fails to offer the comprehensive overview of Roberts' oeuvre she sets out to provide. The presence of two virtually pointless chapters (one on Roberts on the internet and one on the author's media presence) and the book's inadequate length (a meagre 155 pages simply does not suffice to adequately discuss Roberts' oeuvre of nearly 200 novels) give it the impression of being a hastily and somewhat casually thrown-together book. Worst of all are the steady stream of small but grating factual mistakes, including inaccurate character names (8, 100), repeated references to a trio instead of a quartet of friends in the Wedding Quartet series (85, 86), a description of *A Man for Amanda* (instead of *Courting Catherine*) as the first book in the Calhoun series (18) and the professional downgrading of Eve Dallas to "detective" (35). Such sloppiness on the part of both the author and her editors shows a curious lack of respect for Roberts, her readers, and the project of the book itself.

A brief online search indicates that Mary Ellen Snodgrass is not primarily a romance scholar, but has published dozens of guides and textbooks on a dizzying myriad of topics ranging from Greek Classics to nursing to relations between the US and Japan. Both Nora Roberts and Popular Romance Studies deserve better.

Works Cited

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