

Nehring, Cristina. *A Vindication of Love: Reclaiming Romance for the Twenty-first Century*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009. \$24.99; \$13.99 (paper)

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It's unlikely to surprise readers of the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* that a book that promises to reclaim romance for our century makes no mention of the popular romance novel. Or that author Cristina Nehring evinces no curiosity whatever, either about the consistent reading habits of vast numbers of women or the robust sales of romance fiction during this time of economic hardship at the new century's beginning. At the very least, however, this disjuncture is worth this journal's attention. If, as Nehring has it, passionate attraction has been "defused and discredited" and "streamlined, safety-checked, and emptied of spiritual consequence," how do we account for the fact that popular romance novels—promising risk, danger, adventure, and much, much more—continue to fly off the bookstore shelves?

"We have submitted Eros so relentlessly to our enlightened agendas of self-protection and indulgence..." Nehring announces, "that it has grown anemic." Challenge and exhilaration have been forsworn or forgotten, the clash of big, passionate egos forbidden or at very least frowned upon: lovers exist in a state of permanent truce, an ongoing regime of power-sharing. The negotiated daily task lists and the hard-won niceness and fairness attending so many contemporary domestic arrangements have all helped shrink and shrivel the power of erotic attraction. The easy accessibility of erotic toys and ready acceptance of kink is merely the funhouse-mirror image of this timid new civility.

Erotic life, in sum, is duller, less exhilarating, and less authentic than it could be—perhaps, Nehring says, than it *has* been at other times and in other situations, when real romantic love, conceived in the besotted wisdom of the lover's perception of the beloved, took shape amid conditions of inequality, absence and separation. Transgressive in practice, it was heroic in the face of failure. Whereas now, by striving for fairness and equality, by making try after try at open communication and clear, demystifying vision—in

all our feeble attempts to make our relationships *work* in the short run of viable domestic life—contemporary couples only make matters worse.

Boldly anti-PC as it might be in content, in its form this argument is hardly new. At least since the French Revolution, polemicists in this mode have been relocating authenticity to earlier, pre-liberal, pre-modernizing thought and action, typically with very little real-world proof.^[1] Most notably and successfully, perhaps, this form of argument was achieved with manic genius when Nietzsche situated the fall from grace in the thought of Socrates and Euripides and along the way redirected the academic canon toward the tough, tragic pre-Socratics.

Proudly polemical, serenely unconstrained by her weaknesses of social analysis, Nehring makes her points with impressive chutzpah. Her aim is to sound a note of dissatisfaction with the status quo and construct a countervailing body of inspiration. Or at least a reconstituted reading list: aspiring to a braver, brainier, sexier female amatory tradition, she situates the romantic lives of literary, intellectual women (and some men: Socrates is one of the tough, heroic lovers here) within a lineage of quest stories, fairy tales, and heroic renaissance epics. Fidelity is continually and often violently tested in this or that Patient Griselda variant; Tristan and Iseult unite and part and unite again; the virtue of the quest lies in its repeated attempts at the grail rather than the grail's capture.

A vivacious storyteller, Nehring makes charming entertainment from antique narrative forms—at least until all the redundancies begin to blur together, finally to resemble a feminist community mural of a generation ago, with Mary Wollstonecraft, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Simone de Beauvoir, and a host of other favorite writing women and their consorts joined hand-in-hand with Achilles, the Amazon princess Penthesilia, and the Wife of Bath. “Herstory,” we used to call this clunky circle dance of inspiration. In Nehring's svelter twenty-first century makeover, it reads like a set of smart, flirtatious post-feminist seminar papers, the most useful and memorable of which emerge from the examples that bracket the book: the lives and loves, writings and reputations of Mary Wollstonecraft and Katha Pollitt.

Wollstonecraft, of course, is the inventor of modern feminism and wrote two *Vindications* of her own: *of the Rights of Men* and, later, more famously, *of the Rights of Woman*. Attempting, at the end of the eighteenth century, to live her erotic and affective life outside of the bounds of conventional marriage, she met with some painful rejections, underwent deep depression, and twice attempted suicide.

Rejection, depression, and all, Nehring is right to admire Wollstonecraft's amatory experiments as part of her feminist achievement. As she's also right to decry Wollstonecraft's critics, from disapproving female contemporaries to the 1970s feminist academics who remained embarrassed that so remarkable a woman could have been driven to suicide by men far less worthy of history's attention.

And if you're tempted to object that the 1970s were over a long time ago, take a look (as Nehring does) at the recent case of Katha Pollitt, whose witty political essays in *The Nation* have been beating back the tides of reactionary, sexist fatuity for decades (and whose first essay collection, *Reasonable Creatures*, also took its title from Wollstonecraft).

In 2007 Pollitt published a memoir. *Learning to Drive: And Other Life Lessons* began (though it didn't end) with a story of failed love less tragic but more embarrassing than Wollstonecraft's. Shabbily treated by a cheating longtime live-in lover, Pollitt didn't attempt suicide. Instead (after tossing him out), she Googled him compulsively, perhaps for months.

It must be stressed that she never did anything but point, click, agonize, and eventually recover to create a funny, honest and breathtakingly skillful rendering of the particularly awful public/private nature of rejection in our time—and sadly, to cause more than one latter-generation feminist reviewer considerable chagrin and disillusionment, that a movement icon could be driven to such lengths by a man[2].

Nehring is absolutely right to insist that when feminists don't accord themselves and each other the right to be as feckless, as daring, and as disappointed at love as anybody else, feminism hasn't come as far as it ought. But feminists *and* post-feminists ought to be able to read a text in its specificity, rather than merely look to it for ideology or inspiration. Unfailingly celebratory of strength found amid the excesses of violent passion, Nehring's readings are otherwise slight, her range of reference surprisingly narrow.

Forget about popular romance fiction—I found it remarkable how few novels beyond *The Sorrows of Young Werther* she attends to. And when she does turn to the classic nineteenth century British novels, she does so with distressing shallowness—managing, for example, to draw an upbeat self-help message from a glancing treatment of *Wuthering Heights*, wherein “through his love of Cathy, Heathcliff acquires the courage to leave Wuthering Heights, conquer the world, and return to conquer his detractors.” Talk about “trivialization” and “domestication”: one of the great literary productions of failed love (*and* failed adulthood) comes off here as an inspirational self-esteem pep-talk.

Of course, as the entire discussion of *Wuthering Heights* (along with *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*) is shoehorned into a mere page and a half, there could be hardly room for much about the post-epistolary novel's wide-angle view of place and routine, let alone about the restless ironies and complexities of free indirect third-person discourse. Perhaps Nehring's editor insisted that her *Vindication* couldn't go to print without at least mentioning Jane Austen; but whatever the reason, the mention she does make is coy and cursory.[3] Or perhaps this section is so weak precisely because (as I extrapolate the logic of *A Vindication of Love*) it's the parallel and contemporaneous developments of the companionate marriage ethic and the realistic English novel that have dealt some major body blows to Nehring's version of Eros.

Nehring seems to prefer literary forms that tend toward speech, exhaust themselves in a blaze of self-revelation, and are more about their speaker than their object. Love letters, lyric poetry, her own style of polemic: none of these build toward an overarching conclusion but rise and fall in series, bringing to mind an observation made by the man Nehring tells us she “learned the most about love” from. In *Love in the Western World*, Denis de Rougemont said that:

Passion and expression are not really separable. Passion comes to birth in that powerful impetus of the mind which also brings language into existence. So soon as passion goes beyond instinct and becomes truly itself, it tends to self-description, either in order to justify or intensify its being, or else simply in order to keep *going*. [4]

Nehring does indeed keep going, most certainly toward dramatic yet highly generalized self-description. You'll find her book convincing, I suspect, to the extent that you're engaged by an authorial persona given to confiding that she bears “the bodily scars of a loss or two in love,” having been “derailed by love, hospitalized by love, flung around

five continents, shaken, overjoyed, inspired, and unsettled by love.” For my part, I began to feel trapped in a room with the Marianne Dashwood of the first half of *Sense and Sensibility*, with no Elinor in sight.

Struggling to understand why the bulk of Nehring’s reconstituted erotic literary tradition finally left me cold, I discovered that contrariwise, while reading her book I had rather renewed my admiration for the nineteenth century realist novel and become all the more appreciative of the Marianne/Elinor dialogue that weighs good against good amid the conundrums of passion versus propriety, spontaneity versus social memory, and self versus community.

The conventional wisdom would have it, I guess, that we turn to those Austen remakes (and perhaps romance novels as well?) for their Laura Ashley prettiness, their promises of flights of reactionary escapism. But could it instead be that we look to them for visions of love within communities that we no longer know how to achieve or even describe? Perhaps the endless hunger for Austen remakes comes now because we’re drowning in memoir and other celebrations of the individual ego, from performance art to reality TV. My own prejudice (and probably why I write historical romance) is that romantic love has always been threatened and besieged, in ways that can be writ large within sets of manners that aren’t quite our own. But if love is in any greater danger these days than ever before, might not the threat lie within some contemporary surfeit of ego, and not (as Nehring has it) in the self’s domestication?

Nehring is surely right that feminism has created a new set of challenges for passion. Equal personhood is a tough slog; the burdens of shared day-to-day responsibility are daunting. We find our sources of passion and expression where we may. The question of how we love now is wider and deeper, more generally and continually engaging, than Nehring’s *Vindication* ever thought to ask.

[1] I borrow this point from Doody, Margaret Anne. *The True Story of the Novel*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996, 18. Print.

[2] Salter Reynolds, Susan. “And Another Thing; Learning to Drive and Other Life Stories.” *Los Angeles Times Book Review* 9 September, 2007, 7. Print. And (for a richer, more complicated take), see Traister, Rebecca. “The Feminist Who Made Me Blush.” *Salon.com*. Salon Media Group, 26 Sept. 2007. Web.

[3] Nehring, p. 68: “Austen’s silver-tongued heroine hones her wit, multiplies her pride, and learns to say some eloquent ‘no’s.’ If she says yes to Mr. Darcy in the end, it is only because she has reconstructed him from the ground up.”

[4] de Rougement, Denis. *Love in the Western World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, 173. Print.