

Regnerus, Mark, and Jeremy Uecker. *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. \$24.95.

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As romance readers and scholars both know, the sexual ethos of the popular romance novel has changed over the years. Regnerus and Uecker's book *Premarital Sex in America* (2011) provides a sociological context for some of those changes. Exploring the ways in which sexuality has changed and how it functions in contemporary American society, this work contributes to a growing body of scholarship on "late-adolescence" or "delayed adulthood," or as Regnerus and Uecker prefer to call it, "emerging adulthood." "Recently," they write, "we heard, in the span of just a few hours, claims both that '13 is the new 18' and '21 is the new 16.' Confused? That's understandable. But this is the conundrum of emerging adults, the group of Americans about which this book is written" (5). More specifically, the focus is on "Americans between 18 and 23 years of age" (6) which is now part of this "emerging adulthood" wherein one is, by the standard of "being 18" an adult but at the same time one does not self-identity (yet) as an adult. Clearly, at least within the realm of scholarship, there is a growing interest in a new liminal stage, located somewhere between adolescence and adulthood. This marks a pronounced shift in age studies, which previously, or more traditionally, had seen adolescence as the liminal stage between childhood and adulthood.

The book oscillates comfortably between statistical analysis and personal, and at times, anecdotal narratives from interviewees. The authors explain that "[t]o use only national survey statistics to answer our questions would be farsighted: it would give us the big picture, but could encourage all manner of misinterpretations of the data" (9) and that "[w]hile personal anecdotes may not matter much to social scientists, they often mean *everything* to our interviewees. Stories of what happened to them and the people they know carry exceptional weight in their own understanding of sex and relationships" (9). The methodology here is important because it allows for both a "big picture" overview of broad sociological changes and an engaging focus on specific cases, stories that end up

meaning much more to the reader, given their relationship to the national survey statistics, than they otherwise might.

The authors often turn to examples from popular culture for context as well. “Hannah’s method lends itself to pregnancy scares—and to the real thing,” one anecdote explains, adding, “Had they ever had such a scare? Of course. It was like a scene straight out of the film *Juno*” (48). This work thus has the potential to influence the field of popular romance studies, because it already refers to and engages with relevant texts, particularly romantic comedy films. (*The Forty Year Old Virgin* thus “portrays a collective effort to rid the main character of a trait that he’s socially supposed to have lost about two decades earlier” [18].) Scholars of romance in other media will find it a helpful model for bringing sociological data to bear on their chosen texts.

One of the many engaging things about this work is its historical emphasis, much of which seems relevant to the changing representation of sexuality in popular romance. For instance, Regnerus and Uecker speak of the ways in which the “sexual repertoire” (31) has changed, noting that, “[o]ral sex and other types of sexual activity are common within the sexual repertoire of emerging adults” (32) and then later concluding that “[a]nal sex is not in the repertoire of most, at least not yet. Its place is not yet clearly defined and may never be. Given that most Americans, especially women, strongly prefer vaginal or oral sex to anal sex, its practice could well wane in popularity or remain a ‘tried that once and that was enough’ sort of activity. Before then, however, anal sex may grow in popularity simply for the novelty attached to it and online porn’s disproportionate coverage of it” (39). One thinks here of the memorable discussion of anal sex as “the new oral” in *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches’ Guide to Romance Novels*, by Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan—and of the contrast between that discussion, which focuses on erotic romance, and the fact that anal sex only appeared in a Harlequin Blaze, *Private Sessions* by Toni Carrington, as recently as 2010.^[1] (It remains to be seen whether, in an imprint as wide and varied as Harlequin, anal sex will turn out to be something of a ‘tried that once and that was enough.’)

The longest chapter in the study, “Inside Sexual Relationships,” seems particularly useful to scholars of popular romance. In this chapter, the authors consider the economics of sexual relationships, observing that “[s]exual markets are like economic markets: we all inhabit them, and they affect everyone” (52). The book discusses the common motif of sexuality (and virginity) as a “gift” that one gives to another, chiefly women to men—a trope that recurs in popular romance film and literature—the persistence of what they call “the stubborn double standard” (62-65), and the rise of new terms and motifs in sexual culture, like “friends with benefits” (65). “Most young adults don’t actually use the term ‘friends with benefits,’ at least not when they describe such relationship for themselves,” the authors conclude (65-66): it is a term more often ascribed than subscribed to, which suggests the enduring influence of cultural norms that link sex with romantic love. The authors’ economic discourse sometimes frames those norms in rather cold-eyed terms, as when they note that “romantic relationships last longer and are a far more stable source of sex” than more casual, less emotionally-invested interactions (72). But they also cast a refreshingly cold eye on the anxieties about young adult sexuality that periodically crop up in popular culture. “Students are certainly having sex,” they observe in a later chapter, “but more sex occurs within romance relationships than all the media chatter about hooking up has led us to believe” (134.)

In the past year there has been considerable “media chatter” about the impact of pornography on young (and older) Americans—in particular, about the impact of porn consumption on the sexual desires and expectations of heterosexual men. *Premarital Sex in America* explores the messages men may receive from “sexualized media,” from pornography to newsstand men’s magazines, in particular the current focus of these media on what they call “odd sexual requests” (86). (These requests, one should note, they recognise as being “probably as old as humanity” [86].) “One of the most common topics in American men’s magazines like *Maxim*,” they observe, “is unorthodox sexual positions and locations, even though another common topic—what women want—is largely inconsistent with these practices” (86). They also attend to sexualized media aimed at women, noting, for example, that even if *Sex and the City* never “directly made anyone do things they might not otherwise have done,” the television show succeeded in “popularizing [. . .] the narrative of the very eligible, single white female who pursues sex and romance on her own terms” (127). A good deal of additional research remains to be done, however, by sociologists and others, in the representations of “unorthodox” sexual behaviour of female desire in romance media produced primarily by women, notably chick-lit and erotic romance fiction.

Although its focus is on premarital beliefs and behaviour, *Premarital Sex in America* also considers marriage, which it presents as an institution in limbo. “A distinctive fissure exists in the minds of young Americans,” the authors argue, “between the carefree single life and the married life of economic pressures and family responsibilities. The one is sexy, the other is sexless. In the minds of many, sex is for the young and single, while marriage is for the old. Marriage is quaint, adorable” (172). Indeed, Regnerus and Uecker conclude that “[t]here can be no doubt that the ‘institution’ of marriage is in the throes of deinstitutionalization” (204). The chapter “Red Sex, Blue Sex: Relationship Norms in a Divided America” considers whether this “deinstitutionalization” is playing out differently in conservative “red states” and more liberal “blue states” (for readers outside the USA, the colors signify Republican and Democratic dominance at the polls, respectively). Some differences emerge from the data: for example, somewhat ironically reds “romanticize relationships and marriage, and often experience more of them—and at earlier ages—than blues do” (234-35). However, readers subsequently learn that young people in both sets of states “share much in common, including their commitment to serial monogamy and romantic individualism, two ubiquitous narratives among emerging adults” (236).

In the closing chapter of *Premarital Sex in America*, the authors theorise the importance of stories and narrativising sexuality. “Stories,” they write, “tend to issue in sets of particular scripts. [. . .] Sexual scripts specify not only appropriate sexual goals—what we ought to want—but they also provide plans for particular types of behaviour and ways to achieve those sexual goals: the right thing to say at the right time, what not to do, who leads, how to hook up, where they should go, who should bring the condom, what is too much to ask someone, etc.” (237). Clearly, as the authors write, “sex is complicated” (250)! As we critics read and engage with popular romance texts—texts that may supply, or at least document, some of these “scripts”—we need to keep these complexities in mind, to problematise sexuality, rather than treat it as an ahistorical or transparent phenomenon.

If there is one drawback to this book, it is that despite its sweeping title, *Premarital Sex in America* only deals with *heterosexual* premarital sex. The authors acknowledge this limitation at the start of the volume. “Some will label our focus as heteronormative—that

is, privileging heterosexual expression to the neglect of alternative sexualities—” they note, “but the primary reason for avoiding an extended treatment of different sexual forms and identities is that it would have to be a much longer book in order to pay adequate attention to other patterns, to say nothing of the dynamics by which they form and the courses they take” (7-8). One hopes that other authors and studies will fill in this significant gap, and that scholars who draw on this volume will not assume that its conclusions about straight “emerging adults” in the United States can be transferred in any simple way to LGBTQ Americans, or to young people in other countries, whatever their sexual orientation.

Despite its boundaries, this illuminating study makes a helpful case for seeing sex as “complicated,” in writing about it, theorising and historicising it, and indeed, living it. *Premarital Sex in America* shows how sex is given meaning in both the social sciences and the humanities, and it reminds us that the complex nature of sexuality continues to haunt our critical and cultural imaginaries.

[1] For a greater discussion of this “first time” in popular romance, see Sarah Wendell’s review of the book at *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*: <http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/private-sessions-by-tori-carrington>