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Lynn Neal's book *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* is an important book for scholars of popular romance, even if they never intend to read in or write on the subgenre of evangelical romance. In thinking about what separates such a subgenre from the broader category, scholars are required to reexamine some basic assumptions about the nature of popular romance and its female writers and readers. As Neal points out, the two distinguishing characteristics of evangelical romance are a lack of explicit sexuality and a focus on God as a third party in the romance: one who both sanctions and sanctifies the bond between the heterosexual couple. These two elements of evangelical romance should come as no surprise to either scholars or readers of secular romance. What might be a surprise is the way the lines between secular and evangelical romance blur somewhat upon close examination.

At the center of the romance plot for both secular and evangelical fiction is the love story between a man and woman that must involve strong sexual tension, however euphemistically it is described. Overt sex scenes are certainly common in almost all popular secular romance today, except in designated lines at publishers like Harlequin. However, this was not true before the 1970s, when sexual interaction was only hinted at indirectly. Moreover, many who never read evangelical romances still love old-fashioned romances like those of Georgette Heyer, which always feature a strong undercurrent of sexual attraction between a man and woman, though Heyer never goes beyond vaguely-described kisses or embraces. And some evangelical romances, such as Francine Rivers' *Redeeming Love* (discussed by Neal in chapter 6), depict both the abuses and joys of sex quite frankly, if not graphically.

There is also some continuity between the moral values of secular and evangelical romances. Fidelity, monogamy, mutuality, consent, and marriage are prized in both categories, though extra-marital sex is not often condemned per se in secular romance (and of course the erotica subgenre allows a broader range of acceptable sexual practices).

Interestingly, BDSM, at least in its mild forms, is appearing more in mainstream popular romance (even before the advent of *50 Shades of Grey*), as illustrated by Victoria Dahl's 2009 *Start Me Up*. But readers do not expect bondage scenes ever to make their way into evangelical romance, even as wider acceptance grows among the general public. Still, it is not just sex, but the kind of romantic intimacy that stems from mutual trust and faithful love that is at the heart of a successful story for both evangelical and secular readers.

The focus on Christian belief in action is a stronger marker between evangelical and secular romance. Women who read evangelical romance want the presence of God, often combined with redemption through Christ's love, portrayed in these novels, both as an expression of their faith and to validate the human love relationship, while mainstream romance readers might be distracted or more likely put off by such references. Still, there is some overlapping here too. The sense of fate or some larger purpose guiding the union of the lovers is not uncommon even in secular romance. In Lisa Kleypas' Hathaway series, Cam Rohan's gypsy belief in the divinity of fate drives his attraction for Amelia toward marriage. There may even be references to God in secular romance that does not fit into the "inspirational" genre. Maddy Timms' Quaker beliefs are central to her conflict with the Duke of Jervaulx in Laura Kinsale's *Flowers from the Storm*. In order to accept the Duke as her husband, Maddy must feel she is not in opposition to God's light within her. Though such religious beliefs lend an air of authenticity to historical romance set in periods and settings where religion infiltrated everyday life, it is not uncommon for such well-known authors as Nora Roberts or Susan Elizabeth Phillips to make some reference to their characters' belief in God, though such descriptions do not dominate secular novels with contemporary settings. Still, given the fact that most surveys show that somewhere between 80-95% of Americans today believe in God or some kind of higher power, it would be unrealistic to eliminate God or moral issues from popular romance, at least in the United States. The character development of both heroine and hero depend upon their struggles between meeting societal expectations and being true to their own convictions and desires. Perhaps we should even ask whether Neal's term "secular" romance is an accurate descriptor of romances that are not obviously inspirational or evangelical since religious questions (using a very broad definition of that term) are often raised in popular romance: What gives purpose to my life? What duties do I owe to my family and friends? Is there a destiny that guides me? Can I find happiness and fulfillment without looking beyond myself?

Although the questions I am raising about genre boundaries are not explored in Neal's book itself, they flow naturally from her discussion. Breaking down the strict division between what is secular and/or religious can be helpful in thinking about the reasons the popular romance genre in general "inspires" women coming from many perspectives, helping them work through their own problems and relationships. Nevertheless, seeing the ways specific evangelical beliefs and identity infiltrate the evangelical romance genre highlights some of the unique characteristics of evangelical women writers and readers, as can be seen by an overview of Neal's book *Romancing God*. Neal describes in her Prologue how her study "moved from textual examination" to "a story about evangelical women" (7-8). After interviewing and talking with fifty readers and twenty authors who self-identified as evangelical, Neal became interested in how these women interpret their writing and reading practices as helping them "maintain their religious commitments" (10). She is not interested in either critiquing these women's

beliefs or their choice of reading; rather she wants to get away from stereotypes to show “the complicated piety of ordinary people” (10). Neal’s study reveals that evangelical women read and write romance for three main purposes: first, “to demonstrate and maintain their religious identities” (12); second, to validate “women’s experience of evangelicalism and their roles as wives and mothers, friends, and leaders” in a culture where men still dominate leadership and discourse (12); and third, to both express and strengthen women’s devotion to God. Neal explains: “Through the novels, readers maintain a theology of hope as they realize the power of God’s love amidst the struggles of daily life. For them, a relationship with God represents the ultimate happy ending, an ending that evangelical romances reflect and help them achieve” (13).

In her first chapter, Neal gives a brief history of evangelical romance, starting with the work of Grace Livingstone Hill (writing from 1915-1940s), who was later joined by authors like Catherine Marshall, with her famous novel *Christy* (1967), Janette Oke, who has written over “two dozen books and sold over sixteen million copies” (29), and two other current writers of best-selling Christian fiction books,” Beverly Lewis and Lori Wick (33). As is true for the romance market in general, “women wield the almighty dollar” in the Christian marketplace (32). Here, too, women’s romance usually is dismissed as “sentimental kitsch,” but evangelical publishers understand the power of multi-million dollar sales, justifying their interest in profit as a means to spread the Christian gospel. Though willing to overlook what they see as literary defects or women’s lack of intellectual rigor, evangelical publishers and booksellers, such as Bethany House, Tyndale, and Zondervan, set up guidelines for women writers to make sure they meet evangelical theological and moral standards.

In chapter two, Neal explores the way evangelical women negotiate their need for entertainment and relaxation with their commitment to fill their everyday lives with service to their religious community and family, devotion to God, and the need to spread their faith. Not surprisingly, evangelical women choose forms of entertainment that also support their religious beliefs and goals. While these women admitted to Neal that they enjoy romance because it allows them to escape and “forget” their problems, they also justified their romance reading, if they did not feel it was out of control, on the basis that it helped them be better people, much more so than TV or other forms of entertainment. Such women also argued that romance fortifies their friendships with other women, including their mothers, daughters, and sisters. These women find “the novels full of fun and faith” (45) that also encourage female bonds. Neal discovered that these romance connections were more likely to happen among white evangelical women than African American Christian readers, who usually were unaware that such a genre as Christian romance exists. Not surprisingly, women of African American descent wanted to read evangelical romances by and about black women, which are difficult to find (54).

Chapters three and four focus on the ways women readers and writers evaluate the worth of evangelical romances in terms of how the novels correspond with their Christian faith and how they work as a ministry to promote evangelical ideals. Sexual depictions, as noted above, are the primary demarcation between romances that inspire and those that detract, in these women’s estimations. These readers assume that secular romances focus on casual sex and promiscuity, as shown by the cover art of “unclean romantic novels that are out there everywhere” (78). Still, evangelical readers want enough sexuality that the main characters do not end up “more like brother and sister” (83). Most of these female

readers want their romances to be realistic and to show real women's problems. They do not like characters that are too perfect or stories that are too "fluffy" (92). They want happy endings that come after a spiritual struggle. They want "novels that worked for them religiously and romantically" (94). As Neal also argues, these women "imagine evangelical romance reading as a devotional practice through which to articulate a women's faith and a women's ministry" (106). Though most avenues for ministry are closed to evangelical women, "novels represent a ministry by, for and about women" (108). Many women writers of evangelical romance describe how they felt called by God to minister to other women through their novels; and the letters they receive from their readers reinforce the effectiveness of their spiritual calling.

Neal further explores how women evaluate the benefits of evangelical romance in chapter five. First, readers want characters that fortify their own evangelical identity, characters who are strong, courageous, and full of faith. Second, women want to find everyday encouragement; they hope for change and transformation through the novels, such as learning to forgive, to have more faith, to live better lives, and to love the Bible. Third, women use these novels to feel the presence of God in their lives as part of a larger Christian community.

This last goal connects with Neal's last chapter, which also ties back to her title *Romancing God*. As she states, romance "situates my consultants at the center of evangelicalism and God's love. God is the ultimate lover who pursues them and will always be there for them. For these readers, then, Christianity itself becomes a love story as the novels narrate the power of God's love, not the force of his judgment" (159). In this view, God is not against romance and sex, but is their author. God created the attraction between men and women, and he uses it to promote his plan for humanity. Using the scriptural language that describes the relationship between God and his people as that between husband and wife, many evangelical readers see romance connected to a divine narrative that transforms "history from a series of random events into a carefully ordered design that demonstrates God's romance with humanity. Women's fictional devotion, then, both shapes and reflects this narrative of a God who loves unconditionally" (184). Interestingly, many evangelical romances are set in the nineteenth-century American West as a locus for the hand of God in history.

While this last chapter may show the widest gap between "secular" and evangelical romance, other benefits and tensions religious women find in their romance reading correspond with those identified by Janice A. Radway in her 1984 study of women romance readers, which Neal mentions in her Prologue. Both Radway's and Neal's readers use romance to escape their problems, but they also wish to find enlightenment of some kind, even if it is only knowledge of other places and times. Both groups of readers use romance to work through their own identities and relationships, finding both hope and disappointment as they compare their real lives to fictional ones. Both Neal and Radway describe how women romance readers can use their reading practice in a subtly subversive way to claim female empowerment within a patriarchal system, though neither group who were interviewed described it this way. For secular women, this may involve claiming free time for themselves away from family responsibilities to discover personal pleasure. For evangelical women, their belief in their calling to minister to each other and to themselves as they seek to increase their faith and good works elevates the female power they feel through romance; their reading becomes transformational for them personally, even if it

does not directly challenge the male system. Unlike Radway, Neal does not make a feminist critique of the content of romance or the reading practice of those she interviews. Rather, she leaves it to readers to make their own evaluation, and the helpful details of Neal's study make a number of interpretations possible. The scholarly frame and references Neal provides for her data and analysis give a larger context for understanding the nature of her very fine study. What emerges is a nuanced picture of evangelical women readers that will interest scholars of popular romance, material culture, American religious history, and women's history and literature.