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In the introduction to *Women and Romance: A Reader*, Susan Ostrov Weisser inquires whether romantic love weakens or empowers women. “Is it a debilitating illusion, a form of false consciousness,” she asks, “or the understandable expression of a universal human need?” (1). These questions will sound familiar to scholars of popular romance fiction and film, and a dozen years after its original publication in 2001, Weisser’s reader remains an invaluable resource for framing and exploring such debates. Offering a well-organized, clearly-introduced selection of essays and excerpted works by sixty-five different writers, the reader spans more than nine centuries of Western thinkers and theories; its goal, Weisser explains, is to “demonstrate[e] the historical development of [love and romance] as an *idea* specifically relating to women in Western society” (original emphasis 1).

Weisser organizes this vast array of material into an accessible structure. The essays are divided into eight parts, each of which begins with an introduction; in addition, for each essay, a short summary is provided, making it very easy for the reader to assess whether or not a section might offer what he or she is looking for. A quick list of the sections will give you some sense of the volume’s range, variety, and historical scope: Historical Views of Women and Romantic Love; Letters and Personal Writing; Second-Wave Feminist Theory; Contemporary Feminist Theory; Explaining Romance: Feminist History, Sociology, and Psychology, Literary Criticism; The Popular Romance: Readers, Writers, Critics; and The Experience of Love.

The first section, “Historical Views of Women and Romantic Love,” offers the reader a variety of opinions from the twelfth century (selections from Andreas Capellanus on “The Art of Courtly Love”) to the 1970s, with passages included from such diverse authors and contrasting thinkers as Rousseau and Emma Goldman. The subsequent section, “Letters and Personal Writing,” includes both love letters and personal correspondence from important figures in literary and cultural history, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Brontë, and Simone de Beauvoir. The attitudes towards love that are described in these opening sections are as different as the individuals who composed them. Whereas the nun Heloise (twelfth century) wrote passionately to her lover that she would prefer to be his

paramour instead of his spouse, George Eliot (nineteenth century) frees herself from the conventions of her time by reclaiming her self-respect from the man who rejected her.

Although the section concerned with “Second-Wave Feminist Theory” is not as thorough as one would wish, the selections it offers are useful and provocative. Here we find Simone de Beauvoir casting her gaze on the love-theories of Nietzsche and Byron, both of whom famously asserted that men are not as involved in love as women, who make love their whole world; here, too, are the contrasting voices of Cecile Sauvage (who claims that women need a master more than anything else) and Rita Mae Brown (who insists that women need to become women-identified in order to discover their true selves, freed of male supremacy). It would have been helpful, perhaps, to have selections from Gloria Steinem or Betty Friedan, whose *The Feminine Mystique* just celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, but readers who have just started getting acquainted with second-wave feminist arguments about romance will be confronted with many challenging ideas about what it means to be in love and a woman.

“Contemporary Feminist Theory” discusses various texts written between 1978 and 1998—not exactly “contemporary” anymore, but still a handy introduction to some of the discussions that arose in the wake of second-wave feminism. Among the selections of enduring interest are the ones from Lynne Harne, who asks whether heterosexual relationships have become outdated in light of more progressive homosexual relationships, and Patricia Hill Collins, who remarks upon the “love and trouble tradition” between African-American men and women, claiming that this can only be understood in its complex relationship with to “Eurocentric gender ideology” (174). Each might well be of use to scholars of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century LGBT and African-American romance, genres that remain in need of scholarly exploration.

The segment labeled “Explaining Romance: Feminist History, Sociology, and Psychology” shows how diverse these explanations have been, and again we find sharply contrasting arguments for readers to weigh. Francesca M. Cancian, for example, contends that women often appear more loving than men because they are more articulate about this topic, when men prefer a more physical approach; for relationships to work, she proposes, men and women need to reject stereotypical gender roles and attempt to incorporate more aspects of the other gender in their own behavior. Cancian’s account finds an ironic counterpoint in a study by Elaine Hatfield, which shows that there are hardly any differences between the desires and hopes men and women have for romantic love. Stevi Jackson’s account of “Love and Romance as Objects of Feminist Knowledge” describes love as emotional labor performed by women in order to please men, but Jackson disputes the first- and second-wave feminist belief that romantic love would somehow lose its hold on women once they were able to see through it. Romance scholars might find two other pieces here particularly useful: Jessica Benjamin’s post-psychoanalytic description of “The Alienation of Desire: Women’s Masochism and Ideal Love,” and a selection from Lillian Faderman’s famous historical study *Surpassing the Love of Men*. The latter traces the idea of romantic friendship between women: a concept that, she argues, could be regarded as a substitute to heterosexual love and matrimony, and one that may have some continuing bearing on the predominantly female community that surrounds popular romance fiction.

Although it is only four essays, the Literary Criticism section of *Women and Romance* offers some interesting starting points for further research. The first piece here, on Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*, offers insights into the “promises of love” as a transformative force in

this canonical author; the second, Gloria Naylor's 1989 account of "Love and Sex in the Afro-American Novel," would make an interesting point of departure for discussions of the African-American romance in the 1990s and after. Susanne Juhasz's "Lesbian Romance Fiction and the Plotting of Desire" is still less well known than it should be among popular romance scholars, and would make a good point of departure for studies of how the genre of lesbian romance has evolved. Romance fiction scholars might also take note of Vivian Gornick's "The End of the Novel of Love," which claims that late twentieth-century American novelists—or, at least, serious novelists—can no longer take love seriously as an allegory for self-discovery or a means to achieve a happy life.

If the section on Literary Criticism seems quite short, Weisser more than makes up for it in the section that follows, "The Popular Romance: Readers, Writers, Critics." At a dozen pieces, this is one of the longest sections in this collection, although it is often anything but celebratory. In it, for example, we find George Eliot's "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (1856), an essay that pleads for serious writing by women to be clearly differentiated from the frivolity of romantic writing, and "Hooked on a Feeling" (1990), by Elayne Rapping, in which the media critic compares the notions of romantic addiction to other addictions, such as gambling or drug abuse. In "What Does a Kiss Mean? The Love Comic Formula and the Creation of the Ideal teen-Age Girl," Philippe Perebinosoff describes which behavioral patterns were expected from adolescent girls by discussing love comic conventions. Other pieces discuss love as depicted in women's magazines, romantic films, and song lyrics. Including both first-generation popular romance scholarship by Tania Modleski and Janice Radway and a selection of the responses from the romance fiction community (Ann Maxwell, Jayne Ann Krentz, and Diane Palmer) which followed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this section allows readers to situate that conversation in a broader cultural dialogue about romantic love among the producers, critics, and audiences of late-century popular culture.

The collection's last topic, "The Experience of Love," covers texts from the last two decades of the twentieth century. The range of topics here is quite broad, from marriage to homophobia to the emotional lives of older women (in their sixties and beyond). Some of the voices in this section are resolute and upbeat: Barbara Ryan, for example, declares that "facing up to our loves and lovers can only make feminism stronger" (471). Others, by contrast, address the toll that love can take on lovers, and not only in heterosexual relationships. (Jane Rule's discussions of self-loathing and dependency on partners in lesbian relationships, in "Homophobia and Romantic Love," is quite moving and memorable.)

The interplay of voices in this collection makes it an extraordinarily valuable introduction to the conflicting notions that swirl around the topic of love: love is liberating, love is slavery, love does not matter anymore, and so on. No collection on the market covers as much ground and as many topics as this collection, with selections from as many types of writing (theoretical essays, research studies, literary criticism, personal letters, and more). Still, it should be acknowledged that the book's focus on "women and romance" does make it seem as though men somehow do not suffer from the ups and downs of romantic love, and the few essays in this collection that focus on men do little to dispel this impression. As the fields of Love Studies and Popular Romance Studies expand, there is plenty of room for a new collection on these topics: one that would not only bring readers up to speed on twenty-first century developments in the topics this anthology addresses,

but that also would push back against what Francesca M. Cancian, in this volume, calls “the feminization of love” as a topic. The poet Byron may once have declared in *Don Juan* that “Man’s love is of man’s life a thing apart / ‘Tis woman’s whole existence” (Canto I, stanza 194), but if we no longer believe the second part of that couplet, should we really concede the first?

It was, after all, an all-male rock band that told us “Love is all you need.”

Works Cited

Lennon, John, and Paul McCartney. "All You Need Is Love." Rec. 30 June 1967. The Beatles. 1967. Web.

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