

Ganteau, Jean-Michel and Susana Onega, eds. *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature*. Pp. 268. New York: Routledge, 2013. US \$125. ISBN: 978-0-415-66107-2.

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The relentless pairing of trauma and romance in literature is no coincidence. Both trauma and romance—which, apart from psychological and social experience, manifest as themes, narrative strategies and styles—mount formidable and relentlessly popular challenges to the capacities of language and narration. In their recent edited collection, *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature* (part of the *Routledge Studies in Contemporary Literature* series), Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega set out to survey the intriguing prevalence of trauma and romance in contemporary British literature. In their introduction, Ganteau and Onega ground their aims for the collection in “the observation of a double omnipresence in contemporary British fiction: that of romance strategies and that of trauma-related themes and forms” (4). In a nutshell, Ganteau and Onega’s central contention describes the expression of traumatic experience in the romantic mode. They contend that trauma’s imperative to represent the unspeakable and unfathomable has “forced fiction to problematize the traditional conventions of transparent realism” (4) by shifting towards strategies of nonfictional testimony. Interestingly, they argue that such a move also involves a simultaneous and paradoxical turn towards key romance modes or strategies, characterised by Ganteau and Onega as a shift back towards “fictionality and fantasy” (4). The argument is fascinating and fleshes out of some of the key binaries of both trauma and romance: real/unreal, realism/fantasy, history/fiction.

The necessary question that such a critical project must ask, according to Ganteau and Onega, is “why bring in romance at all?” (2). With this question, they set the scene in what is an insightful introduction. The ubiquitous pairing of trauma and romance within contemporary literary and popular texts presents a compelling project to scholars: how is such an insistent feature of literature to be understood? With reference to Barbara Fuchs, Ganteau and Onega clarify their intended use of romance as a mode, rather than what they see as “the narrower category of genre” (2). The role of romance then becomes one of modal qualification; romance is regarded as a distinct and recognisable form that

“collaborates with” or “dynamises” fiction to produce a narrative of trauma (5). They argue that trauma and romance favour parallel thematic concerns, such as excess, psychological imbalance, intense emotional experience that defies articulation and representation, the historical past, and haunting and repetition. One of the introduction’s more useful organising metaphors further illustrates how this relationship is structured: “romance becomes the privileged vehicle for trauma fiction” (10). By envisaging a “crucial collaboration” between trauma and romance (2), the real benefit of this introduction is in its critical optimism; Ganteau and Onega bring these two established fields of scholarship together in a way that is sure to inspire future research.

Trauma forms the organising thematic focus of the book. The collection is comprised of four parts (three essays in each, except for four in Part 3), each with a focus recognisable to those familiar with trauma theory. Part 1 considers trauma fiction’s peculiar recourse to ghosts and haunting as a way of engaging repetition; Part 2 establishes a closer focus on narratives of individual and personal trauma; Part 3 broadens the scope to collective trauma, history and ethics; and Part 4 offers a consideration of the therapeutic possibilities afforded to trauma by romance. As the title makes explicit reference to “British” literature, the collection might have engaged more clearly with the significance of this national literature and its contemporary features. The focus remains, for the most part, thematic: on the mutual occurrence of trauma and romance.

Given the importance of romance to such a critical approach, its modal permutations might have been more clearly described throughout these essays. In her book *Romance*, Barbara Fuchs writes that “Romance is a notoriously slippery category” (1). Designating romance as a mode could perhaps work to embrace such “slipperiness” in its implied defiance of generic categories. However, throughout this collection of essays, there runs the risk of losing sight of this interesting distinction between romance as genre and romance as mode. Such potential for confusion is idiomatic of genre studies more broadly; in a discussion of the relationship between genres and modes in his book *Genre*, John Frow notes that “one of the inherent problems with working with genre theory is of course the lack of an agreed and coherent terminology” (65). Ganteau and Onega’s book risks perpetuating such a trend in the field.

The second group of essays, on narratives of individual trauma, will be of particular interest to romance scholars. In it, Lynne Pearce and J. Hillis Miller focus in very different ways on how intense experiences of psychological distress can intersect with particular aspects of romance. Pearce outlines an impressive and fascinating reading of the relationship between romantic love and trauma. Following Roland Barthes, she considers how the first instance of romantic love can function as a trauma, with subsequent romantic experience coming to be structured around the problem of “repeatability” (72). The value of such an approach, both to popular and literary texts, becomes blazingly apparent in its demonstration of how critical romance studies and trauma theory can intersect, and of how such an intersection can be utilised to read fiction’s fixation on overwhelming experience (see Pearce’s article in issue 2.1). In his enthralling consideration of Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, Hillis Miller considers the role of trauma in this postmodern romance and, in an intriguing move, examines the blending of the novel’s traumas and the reader’s traumatic experience of reading them. Such a consideration leads Hillis Miller to reflect on the nature of fiction itself, and the often-fraught relationship it holds with its readers. These essays

demonstrate a refreshing style of lucid analysis that is often absent from trauma studies more broadly.

History's importance to both romance studies (perhaps epitomised by the work of Diane Elam) and trauma studies is reflected in the third section of the collection, which is also the longest section of the book. Ángeles de la Concha offers a reading of Martin Amis's trauma fictions, where political trauma and sexual violence collide in horrifying ways. Her essay is indicative of how reading the collaboration between trauma and romance can enliven discussions of history. For de la Concha, Amis' trauma fictions situate sexual violence and abuse at the heart of broader social violence; trauma and romance, whilst in thematic collaboration, couple in unfamiliar and often irreconcilable ways. With a very different approach to history, Andrés Romero-Jódar delivers an entertaining analysis of political trauma in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's cult graphic novel, *The Watchmen*. By arguing that this "postmodern romance" (181) reacts to and comments on Thatcher's Britain, the essay also offers a fascinating discussion of how romance modes deliver artistic value as well as enabling a text to challenge, reconfigure and approach a "rewriting" of history.

The final section suggests the compelling and—rarely for trauma studies—uplifting idea of the therapeutic potential of romance. Reading McEwan's *The Child in Time*, Brian Diemert argues that in seeking that "contemporary cliché" of trauma—"closure' or 'coming to terms'"—forms of representation can render the traumatic event understandable and therefore somehow manageable (219). Diemert's analysis of McEwan's novel subsequently demonstrates how "trauma is pared, and what is left is representation. The gesture essentially sacrifices trauma to romance ..." (219). Moments such as this evince the creative critical potential of this book's theoretical project, and will be of interest to scholars working in the areas of trauma fiction and romance studies. Put to good use, such a project offers trauma studies the potential to evolve from its psychoanalytic roots. Romance and trauma, it would seem, are not the strangest of bedfellows, and this book is sure to inspire further scholarship about the romancing of trauma.

Works Cited

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