

Kipnis, Laura. *Men: Notes from an Ongoing Investigation*. Pp. 211. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014. US \$25.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 9781627791878.

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Notes from an Ongoing Man

Last was not, to be fair, a great year for Laura Kipnis – or, from another perspective, it was an elegantly apt year for the author of *How to Become a Scandal: Adventures in Bad Behavior* (2010). In 2015 Kipnis became an international focus for discussions about sex & the academy, and sex in the academy. Northwestern University in Chicago, her employer, created a new rule that stated that student-faculty relationships were not permitted, regardless of any other factors. In response, Kipnis wrote a piece article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2015) suggesting that part of the college experience is relations between faculty and students. This created an outrage, with people on both sides of the argument writing lengthy diatribes about the matter, and a student filing a Title IX suit against Kipnis. Title IX is a piece of legislation that requires universities to support the equal rights of students based, primarily, on gender and sexuality. These events take place as universities around the USA change policies related to students, student safety, and – in many ways – recreate a form of *in loco parentis* (in place of the parents) from the early days of US university life; one that particularly works through the trope of the ‘young girl’ in need of protection (Doyle 2015).

Men is about far more than just Kipnis’s scandal – though the book is certainly the embodiment of the canary falling to the mineshaft floor. In fact, another review of *Men* similarly starts with a discussion of the scandal (Elias 2015). It is crucial, before moving too far afield, to situate just slightly the way that she works through the scandal pre-scandal and to note the connections it has with this book and the way that the book – which is, at least titularly, about men – reflects ideas about how we perceive gender relations more broadly. This is part and parcel of the argument being made throughout the book; not only that, the book preempts the scandal itself and therefore the scandal is a part of the book, its reception, and its overall impact.

A Story Told Once; And then Again

In fact, in an almost Žižek or Bauman fashion, Kipnis lifts lines from her own book for the article – published February 27, 2015, while the book was published in November 2014. One such line, which I’d imagine thoroughly stuck in the craw of many, was that “sex – even when not so great or someone got their feelings hurt – fell under the category of experience, not trauma. It wasn’t *harmful*; it didn’t automatically impede your education; sometimes it even facilitated it” (130) – which is tweaked in the article to: “fell under the category of life experience. It’s not that I didn’t make my share of mistakes, or act stupidly or inchoately, but it was embarrassing, not traumatizing” (Kipnis 2015). It is a small difference, but important nonetheless.

Naomi Wolf famously accused Harold Bloom of sexually harassing her when she was a student – a vignette Kipnis recounts, that concludes with Wolf throwing up in the kitchen after Bloom places his hand on her leg. To which might be added that: “Forget bumbling pathos or social ineptitude – in these accounts, it’s all trauma, all the time” (127). Again, this line is retold from a *Slate* article where she acerbically notes “if power comes in more than one guise, you will not hear Wolf discuss it” (Kipnis 2004). Questioning Naomi Wolf’s story, she suggests that there is a lot missing from the narrative – including the fact that power is appealing in some instances – and asks what is to be done, coming to the conclusion that “maybe a more nuanced account of male power would be a place to start” (129).

In coming to a conclusion for the chapter, Kipnis says that many professors (some of whom are assholes) hook up with students, and it “would behoove the student to learn the identifying marks” of these characters “early on, because post-collegiate life is full of them too” (135). In a final return to the return, preempting what would be a much lengthier discussion, Kipnis gives a pithy and tone-neutral footnote that her university has changed policies and disallowed faculty-student (or student-faculty, a crucial difference which might belie how we understand these) relations. As a way of conclusion she reminds us that “students aren’t children” (136) and that we ought to recognize the ways that we might well be turning them back into children.

A focus on *Men*

This book, unlike a standard academic book, is short on clear, focused arguments about men or masculinity. In fact, one might suggest that it is purposefully so, as Kipnis is seeking not to expound on a theory of masculinity but on specific men and the ways that they enact forms of masculinity that are contradictory, contextual, and concealing. Thus, to the question of what, if any, theory about men and masculinities Kipnis is seeking to elucidate, she gives an early and quick answer: “a dearth of sweeping theories about the differences between the sexes will be found in the pages ahead” (5). Reflecting on her previous work – *The Female Thing* (2007) – she suggests that *Men* is a “companion volume” and that “the not-always-salutary ways that men and women figure in each other’s imaginations is a theme in both books” (7). The argument of the book, if one were to suggest that a series of repeated essays whose own title suggests that they are but “notes”

could have a fleshed out argument, is that men – and masculinity – are neither, as Kipnis puts it, a malevolent good nor a diabolical evil.

Throughout the book, Kipnis discusses a “pretty motley lot” (1) of men and masculine figures – to which she adds Andrea Dworkin in the last chapter, a playfully titled chapter ‘Women Who Hate Men’. Starting the book with Larry Flynt and ending with Andrea Dworkin is fittingly purposeful by Kipnis, as someone who has long defended pornography, and who explicitly says so in the ‘Coda’. In this “motley lot” of men, she covers four basic categories: operators (4), neurotics (4), sex fiends (3), and haters (3). These fourteen men (well, thirteen, as one is Dworkin) are book-ended by a preface (‘Regarding Men’) and a post-script. Kipnis does not describe these categories or really give them much definition, leaving us to think about them as fluid and mingling. These categories are comprised of individuals who themselves most likely would never put each other together as a group. In this way the book’s composition is a bit of bricolage. This does not, though, undermine the interesting (and fun) elements of the book.

While oft fairly understanding of her subjects, Kipnis doesn’t shy away from some potshots as well. Of an author of a Hillary biography, who focused heavily on Hillary’s body, she writes: “having seen a few photos of the author – this is a man who can’t have felt entirely secure about his competitive mettle on this score [attractiveness] either” (185). Kipnis continues, saying “Here we’ve entered the realm of male hysteria, where reason and intellect go to die” (190). It is a no-holds barred opening up of men’s wounds at points, which I’m sure has riled up *angry white men* somewhere. But it is also what makes it a strong discussion – it does so in such a fashion that one is able simultaneously to feel Kipnis’s justification, the men’s anxiety, and a sense of empathy – a balance not managed well oftentimes.

This is not to say that some of the characters in the book don’t come out a bit worse-for-wear; though it is always the underbelly that she is exposing. In talking about Dworkin, she says, “One is tempted to point out that Dworkin either underestimates or just never noticed the vast range of male vulnerability possible in sex” (202). It is this vulnerability that is discussed throughout the book – though frequently coated with humor and a barb or two.

The theme of sex runs throughout the book – whether it is Dworkin’s disdain for it: “Indeed, she was fond of comparing intercourse – along with its propaganda arm, pornography – to the greatest crimes of the twentieth century” (200); or the types of porn that *Hustler* prints and false rumors of Larry Flynt’s impotence. A form of conclusion that she comes to in this regard is that “People want to – and frequently do – have sex with each other for murky and self-deceiving reasons, or for clear-eyed reasons that turn out to be mistaken, or a thousand variations on the theme of erroneous judgment” (206). It seems an appropriate statement for someone so caught up in what amounts to a sex scandal *sans* sex; but it is also a nuanced statement about gender and desire, and the ways that people find to manage these fears, shames, and anxieties.

She convincingly gives us a clear portrait of men and sexual scripts, saying, “if our most intimate moments turn out to be prescribed, well obviously these are anxious encounters: failure hovers, rejection looms” (88). It is this observation that is the most crucial thing to take away from her book. Providing insight into the fact that “we live in complicated times and no one here’s a saint” (148), and the prolific anxiety of masculinity

is a task that she does far more convincingly than some more 'serious' and 'academic' books.

Gender and Complicated Narratives

For a book so focused on men, it is surprising just how much of the book is really about the author herself – not that this is a bad thing. In fact, what is admirable is that men are never themselves just by themselves, but are always in relation to others: other men, and, more frequently, women. This is important because, as feminism has reminded us for well over forty years, men/women or masculinity/femininity are always relational creations and enactments. For the authors of biographies of Hillary Clinton, Kipnis says “reading these Hillary bios, you feel you’re learning as much about the authors as you do about her, possibly more” (181). In fact, at the root of each chapter is her relationship with this man, or this type of man – “I once dated a gambler semi-briefly (it’s possible there was later some recidivism)” (37).

The overall aim seems to suggest that any thorough study of men and masculinity needs to grapple with the mask that masculinity is, and the way that femininity is wrapped up in much of the discussion of masculinity. One is never in relation simply with other masculine presenting individuals, and as authors we too are part of this puzzle.

The book is an opportunity to think about masculinity and the growing field of Men’s Studies (or Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities). Though it has been around for thirty years (see, for example: Carrigan, Connell & Lee 1985; Kimmel 2012; Connell 2005), masculinity is something that is too often left out of conversations on gender and gender relations. The book acts as a possible lightning rod for scholars on both sides of the aisle to rethink the subject and to begin working through the complexity of masculinities in all their ambiguities. So while Kipnis’s book frequently veers into discussions of gender more generally, it crucially sees the importance of turning the lens onto men and masculinity – something that is both admirable and from which other fields of study could take a cue. The book is valuable for this reason if nothing else to literary studies, romance studies, and the humanities. In coming to a final assessment of the book, it is important to note – particularly as Kipnis is a movie critic and of course understands the importance of aesthetics and the now-clichéd phrase ‘the medium is the message’ – the book itself as an object. This book affirms, time and again, masculinity, from its prose through to its blue cover and dust jacket particularly for the USA where every baby boy is adorned blue from before they are born. It seems that this has not been changed for the paperback version either.

All of which brings us to the question of: “what is the value to someone studying popular romance studies?” To this I can but suggest that its wild, uninhibited articulation of individual characters who themselves are part of a romantic and popular discourse is something to strive for and a writing style that academics themselves might ascribe to. For Kipnis, in this book, the unbearable weight of academia is stifling; and it is here where the discipline (and this journal’s readers) might take a cue. Never one to take herself too seriously, *Men* allows readers to jaunt along rather than be taken along on a grueling march. Readers will find themselves laughing throughout, as well as reflecting on the way

that topics keep coming up. The book provides short and entertaining insights into the topic of masculinity, and could certainly be used in a class setting.

As an academic book it is perhaps less useful; Kipnis herself says that she is “actually a bit on the margins, academically speaking” (12, footnote), so I am not sure she would disagree or be offended by that claim. While the book is a wonderful example of hilarity, it is less given to use or inclusion as part of a canon of extant literature on the study of popular romance. Nowhere in the book does it relate itself to a set of literatures, and in this way it posits itself somewhat outside of them. This book will most likely be of greater value to those interested in popular essays – authors such as David Sedaris, Joan Didion, James Baldwin, or Chuck Klosterman – than to those who study primarily popular romance literature. Essays, particularly literary or more popular essays, work to give insights rather than make arguments. In this way, one might suggest that the book – and the essays that comprise it – is not, in fact, an argument but an exposition – in both the sense of exhibition and of writing which expounds on something.

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