

Allan, Jonathan A. *Reading from Behind: A Cultural Analysis of the Anus*. Pp. 288. Regina: University of Regina Press, 2016. US \$29.95. ISBN: 9780889773844.

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Romancing the Bottom: Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow.

When was the last time you thought about your anus? I mean, really *thought* about it. *Analyzed* it. If it's been a while, here's the book to get you going.

I tried to remember any previous analysis of the significance of the anus to which I'd been party, anytime I'd been invited to reflect on the implications surrounding that end bit of our anatomy that most of us engage daily but so rarely theorize. I could recall only one such incidence: my prenatal class at the hospital, almost twenty years ago, in an evening session that covered diapering, circumcision, and other matters pertinent to "down there." Our neonatal nurse informed her class of expectant and nervous parents that some babies were born without an anus, which she helpfully further defined as a "butthole." *Another thing to worry about*, I remember thinking, resolving to count fingers, toes, and all points of egress on my soon-to-arrive son. The nurse's point runs contrary to our author's assertion about the "universality of the anus" (47), but I assume that any *sans* butthole newborns are very quickly given one.

Jonathan Allan has given us a book about the anus. Allan is Research Chair in Queer Theory and Assistant Professor in Gender and Women's Studies and English and Creative Writing at Brandon University in Brandon, Manitoba. A recipient of last year's Academic Research Grant from the Romance Writers of America, he has longstanding interests in popular romance studies, particularly in the figure of the male virgin.

There is much to love about this fascinating book, Professor Allan's first. (Look out for upcoming volumes on the foreskin and hymen, all part of the new "Exquisite Corpse" series on what is left unsaid about the body that Allan is editing for the University of Regina Press—another Canadian prairie city that does, yes, rhyme with the delightful and neglected body part that I can only hope will one day make its way into Allan's series). I could begin my praise with the design choice of the asterisk that adorns the book's cover

and chapter headings (with an etymology I'd like to read as "ass-to-risk" but that really means "little star" and that can be used to indicate omission in printing). I love as well the book's pink endpaper, bringing to mind the glowing tinge of the spanked bottom, the puckered rim of our tender opening. The book is playful and experimental in these ways.

So what is *Reading from Behind* about, exactly? To what end (if I may, and I fear there'll be no stopping me) does it serve? Allan's first line indicates his subject matter: "the role of the anus, the rear, the posterior, the behind, the bottom, the ass in literary theory and cultural criticism" (1). And precisely the *omission* of such. The individual chapters are uniformly fruitful and enlightening. I learned from them. They consist of a series of often very close readings of key texts that Allan presents as case studies from the "anal archive" (19). These careful readings shine light on texts as varied as Anne Tenino's m/m romance novel *Frat Boy and Toppy*, the short story and film *Brokeback Mountain*, paintings by the Canadian Cree artist Kent Monkman, Gore Vidal's novel *Myra Breckinridge*, and two Latin American texts: the Delmira Agustini poem "El Intruso" and the Mexican film *Doña Herlinda y su hijo*.

Allan's larger project in urging us to "read from behind" in these chapters is to de-emphasize the standard phallic reading of the texts of culture. The practice of reading from behind directs us to look for anal eroticism and other posterior pleasures that lie buried in texts and too often omitted from textual analysis that is predisposed toward the phallic. Enough of privileging what the penis is up to, privileging penetration, privileging the top! When we read from behind we disrupt such phallocentrism, with its attendant homophobia and misogyny. Allan wants to "rewrite[e] the erotic monopoly of the genitals" (141), to get away from a "sphincter-tightening" approach that always insists on a certain reading (9). He is reading from behind—privileging the bottom—in order to develop a new theory of sexuality that decenters the primacy of the phallus (132); that evades the binary of top/bottom, active/passive, and penetrator/penetrated; that is more plural and global (128).

Where does this book fit into the field of romance studies, the interest of readers of this journal? While Allan works primarily in queer theory and masculinity studies, those with a focus on popular romance will find much of relevance in his text, and not only in the chapter devoted to a close reading of Tenino's romance novel. Larger themes relevant to romance studies resonate and are discussed throughout the book: explorations of love, romance, and eros in film, poetry, visual art, and fiction, as well as the concept of male virginity and the experience of gay male sexual debut. In terms of the book's focus on anal sex, such scenes have become increasingly common in popular romance fiction. "Anal is the new oral," as Allan quotes the pundits (70-71). Especially in erotic romance and in m/m romance, scenes of anal pleasuring are almost run of the mill. Allan's book helps the student (and author) of popular romance studies think about the meaning of such scenes.

What is left behind by this analysis? A little too often, I fear, clean writing and tight editing. Allan has his writer's tics of self-reflexive wordiness, of excessive and repetitious quotes and phrases ("I cannot help but admit/think/smile/wonder[twice]/note," all within pages of each other [86-94]; riffs on "I want to be careful" that appear four times in ch.8; an over-fondness for phrases such as "it must be noted," "it must be admitted," and "I am reluctant to"). There is the sort of jargon one might expect but still hope to avoid (e.g., "affective and intellectual responses that work to destabilize and critique how we think about normativity, eroticism, and power, especially when figured in hegemonic and

hierarchical terms” [115]). I found myself wishing for leaner writing—for more anality—in his revision and editing process. Sometimes the sphincter really does need to be tight. Allan’s writing, however, can also delight, as in his reference to “the man who refuses his role and embraces his hole” (38).

A larger issue concerns the focus of the book. At first, the text seems to promise an examination of the buttocks, to explore for us the cultural meanings of the behind. But the rear end covers a whole lot of territory and its topography is not all the same. The cheeks are not the rectum. As Allan himself quotes Eve Sedgwick as saying, “The sexual politics of the ass are not identical to the sexual politics of the asshole” (126). A woman dressed in tight booty shorts that cup her round buns is not the same as a man with lubed-up anus ready for a partner’s fisting. Artistic explorations of these two scenarios offer quite different possibilities for cultural and literary criticism.

Allan opens his introduction with a Jennifer Lopez reference to 2014 as the “year of the booty” (1-2), but I suspect Allan’s text isn’t what she had in mind. The cover blurb trots out Kim Kardashian and Pippa Middleton. All these women are famous, one way or the other, for their derrières—but these women are not discussed in the text. In fact, only rarely discussed is the behind of almost any woman (the narrator of “El Intruso” in Ch.6 may be an exception, as is mention of the minor character Alma in Ch.4’s discussion of *Brokeback Mountain*).

From this perspective, the book promises more than it delivers. As Allan notes, the anus is the great equalizer (27). While Freud suggests that some of us are born with more potential for anal pleasure than others (33), we all—male, female, gender-queer, and transgender alike—have an anus. I hoped at first that this book would help me think broadly about gender and the bottom. Yet as Allan eventually makes clear in his introduction and as his chapters lay out one by one, his analysis is one of “anal poetics” and primarily concerns masculinity and, more specifically, queer male anal eroticism.

Women think a lot about their rear end: “Does this [dress, skirt, pair of pants] make my butt look big?” is the stereotypical question. The admired, desired, bedazzling booty is an iconic flaunt zone of female figure and fashion, especially in an era of twerking and a playlist of songs ranging from “Fat Bottom Girls” to “Baby Got Back” to “Anaconda” and “All About That Bass.” To have cake to display, a ripe booty to shake: all this is a complex good begging analysis. There is much to be said about a woman’s relationship to her rear in a culture that fetishizes this body part, both celebrating and punishing women who have too much, too little of these posterior curves, who do too much or too little with them. If I were to give Allan’s own book a reading from behind, I’d ask him about this omission: the status of the ass for women as a source of both empowerment and objectification. I wanted Allan to take me through it and shed some light on these gendered dimensions of the behind. Its sashaying fleshiness gives a theorist much to grab onto, I would think. Alas, such is not Allan’s task.

Perhaps it’s too much to ask: my desire, not his. Fair enough. If I find this focus on the male anus a bit narrow—a bit tight for my fit—I’ll readily admit that the behind presents a vast geography and that there’s a peevishness in taking a book to task for what it doesn’t cover. Any book could always do more; no book can do everything. The man does a lot, and he does it well. Let someone else continue his agenda of reading from behind and use it to produce a cultural analysis of female booty.

It might be better, finally, to focus on what the book *does* do for me as a reader. Here is one way that I like to judge a book: What new question or idea did it give me? What does it open up? What connections does it help forge? The new question I got from reading Allan's text is, for me, a very intriguing one: *What does it mean to read the romance from behind?*

Allan helps us to think about popular romance studies in a fashion perhaps more sideways than from behind—sideways, in that Allan's interests pertain mainly to a queer male reading of cultural and literary texts, or to a reading of queer male texts. Still, the projects are aligned. Yes, let's de-emphasize that phallus, for all the reasons Allan articulates. Masculinist and misogynist hegemony has had its day. Allan's queer theory aligns well with popular romance's feminist agenda in this regard. His book serves as an excellent example of the inherent mission overlap between feminism, on the one hand, and queer theory and a certain brand of masculinity studies, on the other. Read him for that reason alone, if you'd like greater familiarity with those important fields.

This notion Allan gives us of "reading from behind" is a powerful interpretive tool. It is related to the practice of "reparative reading" that Allan borrows from Sedgwick. A reparative reading of the romance—a reading from behind, a queer reading—is one that rejects a patriarchal and phallic-driven notion of sex and of gender relations and that reads the romance genre as a space of alternatives. Much of the current wave of scholarship in popular romance studies is reparative, exploring these women-centered texts as sites of resistance and possibility.

The more Allan's book got me thinking about it, the more the popular romance genre struck me as a form of *writing* from behind. The roles of top and bottom are central to the opening scenarios of traditional romance storytelling, with the alpha hero as top but also, paradoxically, as asshole or "alphahole", as Wendell and Tan put it in their *Beyond Heaving Bosoms* (2009). In the heroine's initial estimation, the hero is often cold, arrogant, intimidating, maybe threatening. Who is more anal than him: obstinate, controlling, emotionally withholding? He will open up, of course. She will end up as "power bottom," topping from the bottom, or neutralizing the top's power through that great equalizing force of love.

Allan himself notes how genre fiction such as popular romance occupies a bottom position in the hierarchy of literary studies (65). The genre writes from behind, pushing out into romance stories the character of the patriarchal alpha and then transforming him into the feminist lover, supportive and egalitarian. The genre props up patriarchy only to knock it down. Admires the patriarch, acknowledges his power, even curtsies before him, but then seduces him into prostrating himself, bending over, and taking it up the ass, bareback, like a real man. Romance novels make that big boy learn to love it. Reading Allan's book gave me this idea: the genre is about bugging patriarchy, over and over and over.

In terms of teaching utility, the book as a whole is probably a bit much for most undergraduates, but individual chapters could be useful in more advanced or specialized undergraduate classes (in literature, film studies, sexuality studies, queer theory) and certainly at the graduate level. The central chapters stand alone as close readings of their respective texts and could easily be assigned individually. This structure is both a strength and a weakness, as the book can feel like a series of knit together and somewhat randomly chosen case studies, particularly as the volume ends very abruptly, without a conclusion or—dare I complain?—a satisfying climax.

My quibbles, I hasten to note, are only because I want Allan to keep writing and to do great writing, giving us fresh ideas and new ways to read culture on the par with those in *Reading from Behind*. In the end (I now see this word play everywhere), what Allan's book yields for popular romance studies is a rich entrée to the cognate fields of queer theory and masculinity studies, bringing romance texts into wider critical conversations. Pick up a copy or order one for your library. Open yourself up (you bottoms). Take the plunge and dive in (for you tops). Either way, shake that booty. It's speaking to us all, and it's time we listen.