

Phillips, Kristen, ed. *Women and Erotic Fiction. Critical Essays on Genres, Markets and Readers*. Pp. 262. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers 2015. US \$40.00. Print. ISBN: 9780786495849.

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Today we are seeing a growing interest in erotic literature for women. I am thinking about, for example, Catherine M. Roach's *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*, where one chapter argues for an understanding of popular romance novels as feminist pornography (2016) and Elin Abrahamsson's upcoming doctoral thesis on romance novels and masturbation. After the enormous success of E.L. James *Fifty Shades* trilogy we have had, at least in Sweden, an explosion of both erotic romance but also of erotica aimed at a female reader. In *Women and Erotic Fiction* twelve chapters analyse and discuss texts that focus on sex and desire. In many ways this collection breaks new ground, which is a task that is both rewarding and problematic. There is a need for more research on erotic fiction aimed at a female reader and there is definitely need for more research that compares and contrasts different kinds of erotic texts. In this short review I hope to introduce this collection of chapters, but at the same time raise a question about what erotic fiction for women is and how the label can be problematic.

In the introduction Kristen Phillips argues that one of the aims of this collection is to "explore the political significance" of these texts: texts that are often seen as both trivial and trashy. We still live in a culture that not only trivializes but also hides women's desire and this is the overall theme of the introduction, which is evident in several of the collection's chapters. Phillips argues that erotic fiction for women can be empowering. Yet, empowerment is a tricky concept. What does it really mean? Empowering for who? Jennifer Maher writes: "We feminist pop culture critics are skilled at unearthing progressive potential in what might at first appear to be potently sexist or otherwise conservative depictions of women" (194). I have spent a lot of time talking about the empowering and feminist potential in popular romance and notice how I unwillingly fall into the trap of defending the genre and how, when cornered by students to give concrete examples, I notice how I tend not to (give any). This is the dichotomy that Linda Lee discusses in her chapter on romance novels where she says that:

Most scholarship on romance novels falls into one of two polarized camps that view these novels as conservative forms that uphold existing patriarchal structures, or as subversive resisting forms that challenge existing structures (54).

There is a little bit of that opposition evident in this collection. Several of the chapters present thought-provoking and highly critical readings of popular texts, but there are also some that find themselves needing to defend the texts they are studying, a position that is both uncomfortable and problematic. Several of the chapters in this collection, however, show how ambivalent the texts discussed are and it is that ambivalence that is truly interesting.

The book is divided into three parts, “Originating the Erotic”, “Interrogating the Erotic” and “Uses of the Erotic”, but there are several themes that reoccur in more than one section of the book. It is always difficult to organize chapters on a variety of subjects that focus on very different texts; another way to go would have been to divide the collection by texts under discussion. The variety of texts discussed in the chapters is both the strength of this collection and its weakness. On one hand, it is both rewarding and challenging to compare a popular romance novel to fan fiction to a semiautobiographical blog and see both similarities and differences, but on the other hand, it becomes evident in this collection that it is very difficult to define what women’s erotic fiction is and the collection becomes like a too loosely fried egg that is a bit difficult to eat. I found all the chapters very well written and interesting but the ambition of any collection is of course to be more than its parts. To say something definitive about women’s erotic fiction in one collection of chapters may be an impossible task. One of the interesting things this book says, without meaning to, is that the “field” of women’s erotic fiction is extremely wide making it difficult to compare the twelve examples we see here.

From Erotic Romance....

Several chapters focus in some way on erotic popular romance. Simon Hardy focuses in his chapter “From Black Lace to Shades of Grey: The Interpellation of the ‘Female Subject’ into Erotic Discourse” on how the female subject is portrayed from the Black Lace books of the 1990s to James’ *Fifty Shades* trilogy and has an interesting reading of the meaning of both female consumption and female submission in a variety of texts. It is of course impossible to capture how erotic fiction has developed in a short chapter and I would have welcomed a few more chapters on Hardy’s theme. He points out how the trope of the female traitorous body recurs again and again, and asks what would happen if we, for example, read James’ Ana next to Winsor’s Amber? Katherine E. Morrissey discusses in her chapter “Steamy, Spicy, Sensual: Tracing the Cycles of Erotic Romance” how the explosion of digital self-publishing has opened up the field for a diversity of romance texts we didn’t previously have and highlights how difficult it is to try and define what is, for example, romantic or indeed pornographic texts as “the boundaries between romantic, erotic and pornographic content are lines that are drawn as much by shifting cultural norms as they are by form and content” (43). Reflecting on Roach’s argument that we label romance “feminist pornography”, I find this an interesting and also necessary discussion. Another way to approach erotic romances

is seen in Tanya Serisier's chapter "On Not Reading *Fifty Shades*: Feminism and the Fantasy of Romantic Immunity" that explores how critics have discussed James *Fifty Shades* trilogy as books that they haven't been able to read, even if they are able to have an opinion about them. This is not just highly amusing but also offers a reflection of the need for feminist readings and also of structural power that I find missing in several other chapters. Amalia Ziv, for example, in her chapter "Refiguring Penetration in Women's Erotic Fiction", uses both Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon to discuss images and ideas of penetration in erotic fiction and makes several good points, but I can't help missing a broader discussion of patriarchy. How sex and orgasm in texts are described is, of course, a recurrent theme in this collection. Naomi Booth captures in her chapter "Good Vibrations: Shaken Subjects and the Disintegrative Romance Heroine" the idea of the "shattering" orgasm that Phillips talks about in the introduction and illustrates again her point with Ana from James' bestseller, raising the question of what the reader enjoys more – the description of Ana and Christian having sex in adventurous ways, or Christian imploring Ana to eat. The argument is that the descriptions of orgasms in the texts are there for the enjoyment of the reader, rather than strengthening the plot, and that even if readers clearly do enjoy reading about how Christian makes Ana feel when having sex, his efforts to make Ana enjoy food might be even more enticing to read, the idea being of course that a lot of women struggle with their weight and long to eat.

Several of the chapters briefly touch on how erotic content in romance or/and erotic fiction has changed with the help of everyone from Modleski to Radway to Mussell and, as I have already said, this is not an easy task. What should be included? When discussing romance novels, it is hard to avoid the "bodice ripper" boom in the 1970s for example. In Jude Elund's chapter "Permissible Transgressions: Feminized Same-Sex Practice as Middle-Class Fantasy", that focuses on Patti Davis' novel *Till Human Voices Wake us*, Elund points out how chick lit as a genre and novels like Candice Bushnell's *Sex and the City* changed the playing field for erotic fiction by making erotic content much more prominent and acceptable. I keep thinking about Imelda Whelehan's excellent book *The Feminist Bestseller* that points out how the so called "women's fiction" of the 1970s has influenced chick lit (2005). Can we trace the development of women's erotic fiction without Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* for example? And what about the bestseller from the 1980s? Where do Jackie Collins, Shirley Conran and Judith Krantz fit in? Elund's aim is not to show how erotic fiction has changed but how heteronormativity raises its, if not ugly, omnipresent head. Heteronormativity is a topic that is also discussed in Carole Weldman- Gantz's chapter on queer content in popular culture, "Selling Gay Sex to Women: The Romance of M/M and M/M/F Romantica".

...to semiautobiographical blogs and fan fiction.....

The hunt for women's erotic fiction continues and some chapters leave both romance and erotic novels behind, and focus on other kinds of texts. In "Erotic Pleasure and Postsocialist Female Sexuality: Contemporary Female "Body Writing" in China" Eva Chen reads two Chinese women's so called "sex blogs" and here the discussion focuses more on the genre, on voyeurism and the chimera of "telling the true story" than on the erotic content

of these texts. In a different part of the collection, Victoria Ong has a chapter on a similar kind of text: the auto biographical novel of a sex worker that in several ways discusses similar issues (“Selling Authentic Sex: Working Through Identity in Belle de Jour’s *The Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl*”). Both these chapters raise interesting questions about authenticity and the ever fluctuating border between fact and fiction and as these texts describe young women’s sexual experiences and touch a bit on how these texts have been received, I again would have enjoyed a more detailed discussion on power. I keep scribbling Michel Foucault in the margin of the book and on a few pages, Zygmunt Bauman whose thoughts of how we build our lives today in a consumerist society could have benefited both these chapters. A different kind of text is of course the fan fiction of *Pirates of the Caribbean* that Anne Kustritz discusses in her chapter “The Politics of Slash on the High Seas: Colonial Romance and Revolutionary Solidarity in *Pirates* Fan Fiction”. Kustritz discusses not just slash fan fiction as a concept but reads these texts through what I would call a intersectional lens, discussing not just desire, but also ethnicity and class in the depictions of James Norrington’s and Jack Sparrow’s love story.

.... to the reader

Two of the chapters approach the concept of women’s erotic fiction from another aspect. In “Male Homoerotic Fiction and Women’s Sexual Subjectivities: Yaoi and BL Fans in Indonesia and the Philippines” Tricia Abigail Santos Fermin discusses manga and anime texts, but from a reader’s perspective via a survey where informants talk about their views of these texts that are often written by women and depicting homosexual men. Alyssa D. Niccolini in “Sexing Education: Erotica in the Urban Classroom” also focuses on readers as her chapter is an empirical study of how erotic texts are read in a classroom. Both chapters have fascinating subjects but would have benefitted from being a bit longer as very little information about how the empirical data was collected is included. The studies presented really piqued my interest and in order to fully appreciate the analysis, I would have loved to have had more information about everything from how the informants were chosen to why these particular texts were discussed.

Popular Romance + Erotica= True?

In September I participated in a panel on popular romance at the Gothenburg book fair together with two romance writers, Simona Ahrnstedt and Lina Forss and one author of erotica, Katerina Janouch. It became evident from the start that we approach erotica in women’s literature from very different angles – it wasn’t just that we weren’t on the same page, we were literally not in the same book. Janouch was very critical of the way that romance literature propagates the idea of One True Love and HEA and advocated a much more liberating view of sex that she found in erotic texts, where “women could have sex [with] whoever they wanted, whenever the[y] wanted and not be burdened by love”. The rest of us were put in the rather uncomfortable situation of having to defend romance literature: uncomfortable as we didn’t think we would have to in this particular panel. In

writing this review I have pondered on this discussion. In *Women and Erotic Fiction* there is an ambition to capture both erotica and romance as the chapters in the collection discuss very heterogenic texts from romance novels to fan fiction to semiautobiographical blogs from escort girls. Do these texts have anything in common apart from the fact that they contain a great number of sex scenes and are written for/by/about women? I am not saying that they do not, but the possible similarities as well as the differences could perhaps be a bit more evident in this collection. Let me give an example. In the introduction to the collection, Kristen Phillips discusses the way an orgasm is portrayed as a “shattering release” but is this release described in similar ways in the rest of the collection? I would say no. From Ana’s orgasm in James’ book, to Jack Sparrow’s in the fan fiction analysed in Kustritz’s chapter, this “shattering release” is very different. And I would welcome studies that focused on that difference.

On one hand there is a strength in comparing different kind of texts in the way that is done in this collection and let me again stress that the individual analyses evident here are both interesting and thought provoking. But on the other hand, isn’t there a risk in “bundling” every text with erotic content aimed at a female reader together without making sure that the different genres of these texts are highly visible? Every good collection of chapters should leave you wanting more and that is true after having read *Women and Erotic Fiction* and I can only hope that we soon will see more research being done on this vast and very diverse field.

Works Cited

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