

Dyhouse, Carol. *Heartthrobs: A History of Women and Desire*. Pp. xv, 262. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. US \$27.95 (hardcover). ISBN: 9780198765837.

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Carol Dyhouse opens *Heartthrobs: A History of Women and Desire* with the canonical Freudian question: “What did women want?” (1) The question itself is recorded in Ernest Jones’ biography of Freud. It is reported that Freud told Marie Bonaparte: “The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is ‘What does a woman want?’” (2:421). Freud’s question was governed by a genuine curiosity and a belief that “the psychology of women [is] more enigmatic than that of men” (Jones, 2:421). In many ways, I would think, this question motivates a significant portion of scholarship in popular romance studies – as if scholars imagine that if they can understand the popular romance they can understand women. The question animates so much of what scholars do with popular romance, whether it be to praise or to reject it. As such, it is no surprise that this is where Dyhouse begins her book, *Heartthrobs*.

Dyhouse’s *Heartthrobs* is a cultural history that seeks to “look at what women have found irresistibly attractive in men” (1). Certainly, this is a welcome addition to a growing body of scholarship in popular romance studies that has sought to answer this question, most notably, *Women Constructing Men: Female Novelists and Their Male Characters*, edited by Sarah S. G. Frantz and Katharina Rennhak. In *Heartthrobs*, Dyhouse considers representations of men in popular culture, largely in the twentieth century, so as to explain women’s desires. Dyhouse explains,

The icons of romantic literature—Mr Darcy, Mr Rochester, Heathcliff, or Rhett Butler—were mostly, in the first instance, products of the female imagination. Movie stars and rock musicians acquire and cultivate images that in many cases have little to do with their ‘real’ selves. Many of the most successful ‘romantic leads’ in the past—Montgomery Clift, Rock Hudson, Dirk Bogarde, Richard Chamberlain, for instance—have been gay. Their performances nevertheless conjured visions of maleness which had women weak at the knees: how do we make sense of this? (1)

Dyhouse's question, like Freud's, is about understanding women's desires. What do women want? And, secondly, how do we account for and explain what women want? The challenge with asking questions such as these is that one runs the risk of rendering all women the same, as if all women have the same desires. This critique becomes all the more prescient when one imagines an intersectional theory of women, which this book does not provide. For instance, most of the men who are desired in this book are white (save for a brief, but insightful, analysis in the fifth chapter). So, is it that black men or Asian men aren't desirable? Undoubtedly, this is not the case. But there is something striking about the ease with which we have become comfortable with white men as paragons of "irresistibility". The exception to this "rule," perhaps is the idea of the Latin Lover who becomes "racially fluid," for instance, Rudolph Valentino playing the role of Ahmed Ben Hassan in the film adaptation of *The Sheik*.

Methodologically, this book seeks to rewrite John Berger's oft-cited remark that "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (qtd. in Dyhouse 10). Dyhouse explains:

One of the primary aims in writing this book is to turn things round a little, and to look at the emergence of women as desiring subjects, linking this with their growing independence in a wage-earning, consumer society. I set out to explore the ways in which patterns of romance and fantasy have changed over the last century, reshaping women's ideas about what they find desirable in men. It is a cultural history of desire from a particular perspective: the book will mainly look at men through the eyes of women. (10)

The goals of this book depend upon a very specific woman, a woman that some of us might know, and yet a woman who might be totally unrecognizable to others. We are dealing with the "ideal reader" (DeMaria, 1978). The challenge here is that Dyhouse's woman is essentially heterosexual, middle-class and upwardly mobile, and more than likely white. So, questions arise about readers who do not embrace these "heartthrobs" or who read them very differently.

The first chapter, "Her Heart's Desire: What Did Women Want?" introduces readers to fictions aimed at the woman reader at the turn of the twentieth century. We begin with Katherine Mansfield's *The Tiredness of Rosabel*, which "offered a glimpse into the daydreams of a young girl working in a hat shop" (11). Very quickly we are told that "in the 1900s, femininity spelled frustration" (12), which will be something of a recurring theme over the twentieth century, reaching its climax with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In this chapter, Dyhouse also reminds readers of the importance of Charles Garvice, who is "almost completely forgotten today" and yet "whose books sold in phenomenal quantities in the 1900s" (18). As is often the case in popular romance studies, the archive is deep. In Garvice's work, we find an author who "wanted his readers to root for [the heroines]. They had to be girlish and modest but not like the impossible heroines of goody goody novels" (19). In her analysis, Dyhouse notes that "Garvice's heroes may have given women much of what they wanted at a fantasy level but he was always careful to avoid direct references to sex or to sexual problems" (19). These novels, thus, at least to some degree, reflected a desire for realism on the part of readers, insofar as the heroine had to be believable. This chapter closes with *The Sheik* by E. M. Hull (1919) and the film adaptation, as well as the first image of Rudolph Valentino, who plays a significant role throughout *Heartthrobs*. For Dyhouse,

“*The Sheik* was the perfect escape fantasy; book and film between them offered a multifaceted vision of desirable masculinity, both masterful and tender: just about all that the heart could desire” (29).

The next chapter, “Unbridled Passions” explores the idea of “los[ing] control” (37), especially in an historical sense, drawing on sources as varied as Franz Liszt (Lisztomania) through to Rudolph Valentino, Rhett Butler, and ultimately fans of the Beatles. This chapter thus provides a cultural overview of the rise of desire. For example, Dyhouse quotes Barbara Ehrenreich who argued that “‘Beatlemania’ constituted ‘a huge outpouring of teenage female libido’ which we might see as having represented an opening salvo in the sexual revolution” (51). This is an interesting perspective because it works to reframe some of the historical discussions of the sexual revolution and squarely places teenagers at the center of it, rather than say, the sexologists who exposed the kinds of sex unfolding in bedrooms across the nation.

The following chapter focusses on the packaging of the male body, which reminds us, that “many of the iconic romantic heroes in literature were dreamt up by women” (52). In many ways this claim, and this chapter in particular, lies at the heart of *Heartthrobs*. Put another way, why is Mr. Darcy so iconic? Why does Mr. Darcy “loom large as an archetype, one of the most powerfully attractive fantasy males in literature, who has inspired countless imitations” (52)? In this chapter, Dyhouse covers everyone from Mr. Darcy to Fabio, and along the way we are reacquainted with Valentino, and introduced to Elvis Presley, David Essex, Paul Anka, and so many others. In this chapter, then, the image of the man, the iconic male, becomes increasingly interesting to Dyhouse. How are we to think through masculinity as represented upon and through the body? But, even though “perfumes, bodies, clothes and imagined lifestyles carry complex cultural meanings,” it must be admitted that “for many women, these on their own haven’t been enough to fuel fantasies, dreams, and desires: they have needed to imagine a *story*” (71).

The fourth chapter, “Once upon a dream: Prince Charming, Cavaliers, Regency Beaux,” turns our attention to the fairy-tale hero, Prince Charming, who “in a young girl’s imagination [...] represented looks, class, and valour” (73). In this chapter, we learn that “hero worship was part of the [Victorian] culture, and thought to be improving, because it might inspire emulation. Girls couldn’t aspire to *be* great men, of course, but heroes could still be venerated as masculine ideals, and potential husbands measured against their stature” (73). In this rendering, who could ever achieve the ideal? Included in this chapter is discussion of Georgette Heyer’s heroes, all of whom

follow a formula. She herself referred to them as falling into one of two categories; they were either ‘Mark I’ or ‘Mark II’ heroes. The first she defined as the ‘brusque, savage sort with a foul temper’; the second tended to be suave, well-dressed, and rich. (81)

One of the most fascinating aspects of this chapter is its consideration of Liberace, a figure who has received renewed scholarly interest; for instance, he is a key figure in Harry Thomas’s *Sissy!: The Effeminate Paradox in Postwar US Literature and Culture*. Dyhouse’s chapter considers Liberace alongside Barbara Cartland, who was seemingly as flamboyant as Liberace: “Liberace, in his performance, and Cartland, in her romance, busied themselves

in highly gendered representations that were oddly devoid of sexuality” (93). This aspect of the chapter is highly interesting and worthy of further consideration.

The following chapter, “Dark Princes, Foreign Powers: Desert Lovers, Outsiders, and Vampires,” continues our exploration of the princely figure, the iconic male hero, but in this chapter, we move beyond the persistent whiteness of the romantic hero. However, the author notes,

Fantasies around dark-skinned exotic lovers on the cinema screen or in romance fiction had their limits, not least because they were generally imagined as appealing mainly to white women; in Western culture, black or non-white women as sexual subjects rarely got a look in[... ;] Harlequin Enterprises set up Kimani Press in 2005, to feature ‘sophisticated, soulful and sensual African American and multicultural heroes and heroines,’ with a first launch of Kimani romances in 2006. (111)

Over the course of the chapter, readers learn of the “threatening” (112) nature of race. This chapter reminds us of the complicated history of the popular romance when it comes to dealing with diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism. The chapter closes, oddly perhaps, with a brief analysis of the rise of the vampire romance, which, perhaps more than any other, reaffirms whiteness, but now, in the case of *Twilight*, it sparkles.

The next chapter, “Soulmates: Intimacy, Integrity, and Trust” returns us to the seemingly romantic ideals of chivalry. In this chapter, we find discussions of medical and hospital romances that are quite helpful for scholars of popular romance. Dyhouse notes: “Doctors came to occupy a prominent place in twentieth-century romance” (130). For Dyhouse these romances mark a shift towards the intimate. She explains:

For a woman writer of romance, a hero is someone much more ordinary, who, once committed to the heroine, gives shape to her life and makes it meaningful. *Her* quest is to find a man whom she can marry, and who will make her life imaginable. (143-144)

In this rendering, we see a shift towards the idea of the “soulmate,” which embodies, perhaps, the most romantic of ideals.

The penultimate chapter, “Power: Protection, Transformative Magic, and Patriarchy” thinks through the challenge of power and patriarchy. If we return to Freud’s question that opened this book, “What did women want?” (1), one is tempted to ask if it was patriarchy after all, or at least, “the lure of patriarchy” (149). Dyhouse provides at least one explanation for this, noting, “Attachment to a rich and powerful man could offer protection to women. It might seem to offer the promise of life transformed: comfort, luxury, new horizons, and a new social order. The dominating importance of marriage in romance fiction is bound up with the promise of transformation. The heroine’s life is brightened and settled by it—at least in her dreams” (149). One can almost imagine Germaine Greer’s oft-cited remark about “cherishing the chains of her bondage” (202). In the novels of Heyer, for instance, readers find

an affectionate picture of both masculinity and patriarchy: brothers are good-hearted fun to be with, uncles are kind, and heroes, of course, are paragons or enlightened despots. You do get the odd villain, like the Comte de Saint-Vire, but the decent fellows make short work of them. The injuries of patriarchy—girl children unable to inherit, sexual double standards, and the constraints of femininity—are brushed aside, ignored, or quickly forgotten. (151)

Patriarchy and power remain interesting and important in the romance.

In this chapter, we also see “a new trend from the 1960s onwards towards explicitness in writing about sexuality” (153). Dyhouse ties this to the landmark text, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, published in 1971, as well as Alex Comfort’s *The Joy of Sex*, published in 1972. On this point, it seems that there is much to be gleaned for romance scholars: what was/is the role of the sex manual in the study of popular romance? After all, Comfort’s *The Joy of Sex* was a best-seller. To be certain, Dyhouse rightly critiques *The Joy of Sex* for some of its less savory elements, noting, “the book contained quite a lot that made women uneasy. The vagina, for instance, is described as looking scary to men” (153). In the words of Ariel Levy, *The Joy of Sex* was “a penis propaganda pamphlet” (qtd. in Dyhouse 153). Even so, in these years we see a specific and explicit interest in sexuality as more than a theoretical interest, but as a quotidian practice of women: “the lid had come off Pandora’s box” (154).

Finally, Dyhouse explores the anxieties of feminists surrounding the popular romance novel in this chapter. Dyhouse explains that “since the 1970s, fantasy scenarios where heroes ‘overcome’ women’s resistance have raised anxieties about ‘rape’ for feminists” (159) and further explains, “to understand ‘rape fantasies’ in novels for and by women in the 1960s and 1970s the cultural historian needs to look closely at the writing. Books by women tended to invest the male hero with dominance and represent women as relatively passive because this accorded with the gendered expectations of the time” (159). We are told that by the 1990s, “The image of girls as powerless and hopelessly frail had been eroded by popular cultural representations such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*” (162). In many ways, this chapter is the densest and most theoretically interesting, however, it moves quickly, perhaps too quickly. An entire book could be written on the three themes that appear throughout this chapter alone.

The final chapter, “Sighing for the Moon?” asks, “what does it mean to dream of a lover?” (167). Such a question shifts away from the contents of the dream and more towards the action of dreaming; we are reminded that “Victorian girls were regularly upbraided for daydreaming, for being fanciful, for losing themselves in the world of their imaginations. This was nothing new” (167). One cannot help but think of yet another Freudian intervention here—Freud’s essay, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming”: maybe it’s just me, but Freud lurks in the shadows of so much of *Heartthrobs*. Perhaps Freud is a heartthrob in that he has captured our attention and his questions have continued and will continue to provoke discussion for decades to come.

In this final chapter, we are also treated to a review of the state of scholarship on the popular romance, which points towards its future.

By the end of the century, the world of the romantic novel had been completely transformed by the internet and growth of the World Wide Web. A growing number of websites now allow women to share views on the writing and

reading of romance. Examples include: <http://teachmetonight.blogspot.co.uk>, 'Musings on romance fiction from an academic perspective'; <http://romancenovelsforfeminists.blogspot.co.uk>, <http://smartbitchestrashybooks.com>, and several more. There are also specialist journals such as the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*. (179)

A welcome recognition, to be certain, of the growing field of popular romance studies, that recognizes that the field is active not just in the hallowed halls of the academy, but also the internet. By the close of *Heartthrobs*, we are presented with a hopeful vision of the future of popular romance fiction:

Maybe we can look forward now to a future in which men and women see each other less as gendered objects onto which they project their own desires and longings, and instead, strive to relate to each other respectfully, as individuals and human beings. (191)

A hopeful vision to be certain, but one that speaks to its own absences. How do scholars account for the rise of the queer heartthrob in popular romance fiction? Dyhouse began by noting that many of the early heartthrobs, it turned out, were gay. But what then of the rise of the male/male popular romance novel? Perhaps nowhere is masculinity more on display than in the male/male popular romance novel. Secondly, I am surprised at how little scholarship on masculinity was consulted or engaged with over the course of *Heartthrobs*. Dyhouse, in the last paragraph, mentions "hegemonic masculinities—or femininities—may be harder to sustain than in the past" (191), but we are provided no "proof" of this, nor are we treated to any lengthy discussion of Connell's theoretically rich concept.

Heartthrobs is a useful addition to a growing body of scholarship on the popular romance novel, and more particularly the hero of the popular romance novel. Hopefully, this book will spur future discussions of the popular romance novel and its hero. Still remaining to be written is a history of the alpha male hero. Nonetheless, *Heartthrobs* will be valuable to students of the popular romance novel in particular.

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