

Young, Helen. *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*. Pp. 224. New York: Routledge, 2016. US \$49.95 (paperback). ISBN: 9781138547704.

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That popular romance has a racism problem will not be news to anyone who's been paying attention. Big publishers fail hard at inclusion. The Romance Writers Association (RWA) has a history of marginalizing writers of color, as do many review sites. Some of the genre's bestsellers include offensive stereotypes while others imagine implausibly lily-white worlds. There is momentum toward change; numerous romance authors, librarians, booksellers, and reviewers have been working to increase diversity in the field, especially the proportion of what Corinne Duyvis has termed #OwnVoices books, written by authors who share a protagonist's minoritized identity. RWA has taken steps towards acknowledging exclusions in its past and fostering more inclusion going forward. A few white authors have proved willing to hear criticism of hurtful elements in their books and behavior, though others remain stubbornly attached to ideas of their own blamelessness. The time seems ripe, then, for scholarly examination of how whiteness pervades popular romance. Jayashree Kamblé's treatment (2014) of whiteness and reproductivity is a notable contribution to this endeavor, but there is plenty of work to be done. Helen Young's new wide-ranging interdisciplinary study, *Race in Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, offers findings relevant to popular romance scholars.

Young's book includes an introduction which explores the relevance of fantasy in popular culture, seven chapters that move across the twentieth century and into the twenty first, and a short afterword. Her focus is mostly on fiction but she also addresses movies, television shows, and game adaptations as well as online fan communities. The first chapter sets the stage for the rest of the study by exploring the genre's racialized "founding fantasy" in the works of two of its best known and most influential writers, J. R. R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard. She

argues that race-based ideologies which privileged them as White men very strongly influenced the shape of the worlds they imagined, worlds which were decidedly Eurocentric and reproduced White race-thinking that had justified

both British imperialism and slavery in the US since at least the eighteenth century. (16)

Particularly influential elements of the worlds they constructed are racial logics – linking biological type or appearance to other characteristics; (imagined) medievalism; and eurocentrism. As Young puts it with regard to Tolkien: “Racialized taxonomies shape the cultures of Middle Earth, and although these leave space for multicultural and cosmopolitan readings, they are also very problematic” (23). Moreover, their worlds “are Europe-like and medievalist: they create geographical and social landscapes which support the white ethnoscares of their people” (28). Young repeatedly notes that her aim is not to adjudicate whether these authors were personally racist but rather to analyze “the ways their writings serve to channel centuries-old constructs into contemporary popular culture” (17). Her focus remains on the ways their writings have shaped the genre as it developed.

Chapter 2, “Forming Habits: Derivation, Imitation, and Adaptation” argues that although Tolkien (high fantasy) and Howard (sword and sorcery) were influential in their subgenres, “[t]he Whiteness so central to both their worlds only became a habit – convention – through repetition ... first through imitation and then adaptation” (41). It took the collective work of generations of authors repeating their “tropes, structures, and form” (41) to shape the genre. Setting and characters are key: “The vast majority of Fantasy protagonists ... have physical characteristics associated with Whiteness” (44) while authors draw both on real-world geographies and ideas about “foreign” places to represent Others. Dominant, conventional representations within the genre in the mid- to late twentieth century offer white savior protagonists intervening in exoticized foreign places. As similar patterns obtain in romance novels—sheikh romances are only the most obvious portion of that iceberg—romance scholars should take heed. At the same time, work by African American authors Charles Saunders and Samuel Delany illustrate that this was not the only possible path; these writers do not “merely ‘flip’ the somatic markers of their protagonists, but rather create worlds in which the racial logics that structure so many Fantasy worlds do not exist” (47).

Young’s treatment of “The Real Middle Ages” (Chapter 3) focuses on “Gritty Fantasy.” Despite its seeming rejection of certain forms of glossy world-building, this subgenre “draw[s] directly on the habits of Whiteness established largely through the kinds of Fantasy it claims to have rejected” (64). In other words, whiteness is persistent. One element of Young’s study worth emulation is her continual attention to audiences as well as authors as makers of meaning. She explores “tension between real and imagined worlds” – and in the case of the medieval era, “the cultural power of a period that is considered simultaneously past and ahistorical” (65). For scholars of historical romance, the ways authors manage genre conventions/audience expectations and historical realities is worthy of additional scrutiny—as are reader responses to “the convention of reading Whiteness as normative” (79).

“Orcs and Otherness” (Chapter 4), at first glance the chapter least relevant to scholars of romance, focuses on literary, filmic, and game orcs, attending carefully to the ways they are racialized. It will be of particular interest to scholars of paranormal romance. Here, as elsewhere, Young gestures toward but does not fully analyze the parallels as well as disjunctions between fantasized “Oriental” Otherness and depictions of Africa/Africans as Other—something also relevant to various subgenres of romance, including sheikh romance. Chapter 5, “Popular Culture Postcolonialism,” attends to counter-narratives through the

work of authors including Nalo Hopkinson and Daniel Heath Justice, while observing that “Multicultural literature is almost always thought of, and approached, as matter for minorities and thus as irrelevant to a presumed-white majority” (116). Through her exploration of founding authors and genre formation, Young has shown how “Fantasy’s habits of Whiteness tend to re-inscribe colonialist ideologies, perspectives, and narratives”; here, analyzing the work of authors of color and indigenous authors, she shows that “those habits can be broken by telling different stories in different ways” (120). Given that publishers continue to marginalize and exclude work by authors of color, especially work that pushes genre boundaries, romance scholars can be attentive to how an insistence on the “popular” in popular romance can reproduce those exclusions. Notably, to the extent that 2018 conference programs at IASPR, PCA, and PopCAANZ are representative, romance scholars already do better than publishers in attending to work produced outside the Anglophone world, and by #OwnVoices authors, though work on Native/Indigenous romance has barely scratched the surface.

Her treatment of urban fantasy (Chapter 6, “Relocating Roots”) also offers useful ways of thinking about paranormal and dystopian romance, as well as small town romances which imagine ethnically homogenous communities as an antidote for white anxieties (typically unacknowledged or disavowed) about identity and difference. Romance scholars have shown how modern notions about female autonomy and companionate marriage pervade romance, especially in historical subgenres; they have been less attuned to how racial logics—and indeed the whiteness of ideal(ized) family structures—operate in tandem with gendered ideals to construct romantic fantasies. If there is a gap in Young’s book, it is her relative silence on how gender structures both the racialized fantasy worlds she analyzes and the ongoing debates about the authority of creators and their worlds. Nonetheless, popular romance scholars can learn a great deal from Young’s study, including the importance of asking how habits of whiteness have come to be inscribed in the genre—and how those habits might be unlearned. To this last point, Young’s final chapter, on “RaceFail 09” (Chapter 7, “Breaking Habits and Digital Communication”) focuses on three months of online debate, ranging from acrimonious to thoughtful, among fans and authors about “race and representation” (171) in the Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) genre community. The contours and discursive moves of the hundreds of blog posts and comments from that period are in numerous respects specific to SFF but will resonate with those who have observed similar kerfuffles in Romancelandia. A decade later, Young’s take-away from her brief afterword is spot on: “the idea of greater inclusiveness is more appealing than the process of change itself” (190).

Works Cited

Kamblé, Jayashree. *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology*. New York: Palgrave, 2014.