

Roach, Catherine M. *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*. Indiana University Press, 2016. Xvi + 223 pp. \$18.00 (softcover). ISBN: 9780253032485.

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Catherine Roach's book-length scholarly exploration, *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture* (2016), is partly a memoir, partly scholarly analysis, and all a highly readable and engaging travel guide to Romancelandia. Positioning herself as an *acafan* and a woman in love, Roach marries scholarly critique with personal narrative of her own journey to becoming a published romance author. In explicitly writing herself into the text about the centering of women's stories and desires, Roach models a version of feminist praxis—integration of theory/scholarship and action—that is endemic to women's and gender studies disciplines.[1] Roach similarly models the importance of analyzing diverse romances from across the genre; she uses works like Beverly Jenkins *Indigo* (1996), Suzanne Brockmann's *Force of Nature* (2007), and James Buchanan's *Hard Fall* (2009) to support her claims about popular romance fiction.

The book, purposefully accessible for a non-scholarly audience, develops provocative ideas about the foundational messages of popular romance fiction. Roach's central claim is "that romance novels are popular because they do deep and complicated work for the (mostly) women who read them. There is a reparative aspect to this work, to try to make up for the costs to a woman's psyche of living in a culture that is still a man's world" (11). She highlights that the work is both "transgressive and empowering" and even fun; it includes "a refusal to be limited or lessened by narrow gender roles and toxic ambivalences about women's sexuality. And there is a mythic or religious nature to this work, a testament of faith in the redeeming power of love as of ultimate concern in human life" (11). These two poles—of erotic faith and reparation fantasy—play prominently through the book.

In the first chapter, "Find Your One True Love: Book Lovers and the Romance Story," Roach situates her methodology in line with two foundational works of romance scholarship—Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) and Pamela Regis' *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003). Roach explains that she "engaged in four years of participatory ethnographic research within communities of romance authors and readers in the United States, based around Romance Writers of America" (11). This is an interesting comparison to Radway's foundational study of the Smithsonian readers, an ethnography that

focused on drawing empirical conclusions (5) and performing psychoanalytic analysis of readers' responses (14). While there are many distinctions to be made between Roach and Radway, one key difference in their ethnographic approaches is that Roach, unlike Radway, is part of the Romancelandia community—as a reader, writer, fan, and scholar.

Later in the chapter, Roach describes Regis' eight essential narrative elements of romance fiction, and differentiates Regis' literary approach from her own. Whereas Regis mapped the romance genre's literary conventions, Roach “[works] instead from an interdisciplinary gender and cultural studies perspective, and my elements pertain to a different category of description. [...] I am interested in the deep structure of the romance story” (20). These deep structures (a term common in the social sciences) are “the core claims about romantic love made by the broad romance narrative and then exemplified in cultural products such as romance novels” (20). Roach's nine essential elements are interconnected, forming a narrative of their own:

1. It is hard to be alone, especially
2. as a woman in a man's world, but
3. romance helps as a religion of love, even though it involves
4. hard work and
5. risk, because it leads to
6. healing,
7. great sex, and
8. happiness, and it
9. levels the playing field for women. (20)

These elements show the pairing of erotic faith and reparation under patriarchy, and while they may seem explicitly heterosexual, Roach demonstrates throughout the book how they apply to characters and romances that represent diverse sexualities.

Chapter three, “Notes from the Imagination: Reading Romance Writing,” features a discussion between professor Catherine Roach and romance author Catherine LaRoche, taking place in a coffee shop at the University of Alabama. The form of this chapter reflects the ways that feminist academic and Romancelandia communities have often made assumptions about each other based on stereotypes and incomplete information. This chapter serves as a model for talking across these borders and, since Roach herself occupies both communities, an example of the value of speaking, writing, and reading from our own multiple positionality. She engages with assumptions and debates that harken back to earlier scholarship, such as the nature of realism vs. escapism, the danger of a romantic imperative, and false expectations about sex. Other chapters provide glimpses into these two communities: Chapter 7, “Notes from the Writing: ‘Between the Sheets’ and Other Moments toward Romance Novelist,” describes the transition from academic writing to romance fiction writing, and Chapter 5, “Notes from the Field: Romance Writers of America,” highlights the differences—sartorial and otherwise— between academic conferences and the Romance Writers of America conference.

Roach's central claim is explored in the greatest detail in chapter eight, “Happily Ever After: The Testament of Erotic Faith,” the final chapter before a brief epilogue. Here she unpacks the “sacred guarantee” (166) of the happily-ever-after (HEA) using the concepts of “*erotic faith*” and “*reparation fantasy*” (167). Roach uses gay romance novels to explore the

concept of erotic faith that “is powerful enough to triumph over homophobia or heteronormativity” (175). As popular political sloganing goes, *love is love is love*. Roach illustrates the reparation fantasy by focusing on novels with explicitly patriarchal, alpha heroes, and suggests that their taming—by love for the heroine—represents the fantasy of the end of patriarchy. She also notes that the appeal of “woman-oriented gay and slash romance pulls back the veil of patriarchy to dramatize the open-hearted man behind the mask, the full person behind the tough-guy guise that patriarchy imposes on men” (180). She is careful to note that romance fiction doesn’t ultimately change patriarchy, but rather it provides us the fantasy space to see that “patriarchy itself is a fantasy,” and to provide hope that “patriarchy could end” (184).

Overall, Roach’s ambitious project accomplishes several important goals, not the least of which is providing a model of feminist praxis both in the form and the content of the book. By situating herself in multiple positions within the book, Roach demonstrates a compelling way to balance the scholar’s emphasis on analysis and argument with the imagination and emotion inherent in the romance writer, not to mention the ardor of a fan and a woman in love. She details her path to romance publication, showcasing the hard work and persistence—and luck—that are embedded in the process. And she presents intriguing arguments—particularly about romance as a reparation fantasy for women under patriarchy—that deserve deeper consideration, especially from an explicitly intersectional framework. How does romance challenge patriarchy when novels feature protagonists who defy gender norms, or whose sexuality is complex, or whose identities are a mix of privilege and oppression? How might the Beta hero challenge patriarchy and free the love interest from the task of taming the Alpha male? That Roach provides a framework to begin considering these questions makes it an important addition to the conversation about the relationship between feminism and romance.

[1] “Women’s studies has long understood the false divides among the traditional categories of scholarship, teaching, and service. It is founded on the idea that praxis (integration of learning with social justice) and commitment to one’s scholarly work can co-exist” (Berger 77).

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