

Weaver-Zercher, Valerie. *Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels*. John Hopkins University Press, 2013. Pp. 315. US \$24.00 (paper). ISBN: 9781421408910.

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Amish romances became a part of the mainstream romance industry with the commercial success of Beverly Lewis' 1997-1998 trilogy *The Heritage of Lancaster County* (Cordell 2). *Thrill of the Chaste* vouches for the important position of this subgenre in popular romance scholarship. The author, Valerie Weaver-Zercher, defines the subgenre as "a tripartite literature of chastity: chaste texts about chaste protagonists living within a chaste subculture" (13). She begins the book by emphasizing her social position as an author, "a reader, a researcher who has friendships with several of her subjects," which enables her to examine the history of Amish romances closely (xiii). Her aim is to explore the relationship between the broader genre of inspirational romance fiction and Amish fiction. Hence, her preference for the term "Amish romance novels," instead of the commonly used "bonnet fiction," because it is more inclusive: the term includes the element of faith, and indicates an association with popular genre fiction (xvi).

Thrill of the Chaste is best described as a comprehensive study of a rarely explored and remarkable culture, showcasing the producers, distributors, and consumers of Amish romances. The first three chapters analyse the paratextual elements, plot construction, and characterization of these romances. The book journeys forward to an examination of the complexity of religious threads in the subgenre, outlining the Evangelical, Anabaptist, Mennonite, and Amish discourse communities. Weaver-Zercher argues that the popularity of these chaste romances indicate the flawed promises of the new millennium, as their readers find an alternative reality in the nostalgic, Amish fictive world. She claims that these texts are much more than just "bonnet rippers" (66), or "pure potboilers" (73), and to fully understand their complicated nature, one must "listen more carefully to the writers and readers of the novels, as well as to the meaning that they make from the books they love" (77). She looks at chastity as the key defining feature of this subgenre that engages a vibrant community of Evangelical Christians.

Weaver-Zercher maintains that a young woman standing in the fields, wearing a bonnet, is fast becoming a sign of commercial triumph. In the first chapter, "Slap a Bonnet on the Cover," she gives a detailed description of the cover art of Amish romance novels to

facilitate an understanding of the consumer culture of the subgenre and distinguish it from its “Amishesque” derivatives (3-4). She attributes the growing consumption of Amish romances to two phenomenon: hypermodernity and hypersexuality. Amish romance novels promote the “purity culture” that advocates “abstinence, monogamy, modesty, and sexual fidelity” in opposition to a hypersexual society (11). Hypermodernity, on the other hand, evokes a nostalgia for a simpler life style and resists modernity. Very often, the plots of these didactic romances follow the Amish heroine’s journey from the “ostensibly empty religion of her forbears to a vibrant ‘relationship’ with Christ” (117). This critique charts the distinctive trajectory of a spiritual, heterosexual, and devotional romance, wherein the Happily Ever After is interchangeable with an awakening, or a renewal, of faith: “Almost without fail, the concluding scene of a book or a series has the hero and the heroine declaring love for each other, and often love for God as well” (142).

Thrill of the Chaste details the publishing history of Amish romances, variations in their plot structures and settings, and categorizes their readers according to their socio-religious status. It comments on the production and circulation of these romances and explores the strategies that the publishers utilize to promote them. Three out of ten chapters are devoted to the publication circuit of the Amish romance novels, which include informative interviews with stakeholders and draw a clear picture of the popularity of the subgenre. Weaver-Zercher utilizes the readers, writers, and publishers’ theories on the popularity of Amish novels to develop her argument. Her interviewees point out a number of psychological, cultural, and religious factors behind this popularity: “postrecession nostalgia, a longing for the pastoral or simple life, anxiety about technological dominance, and desire for marital and familial coherence” (83). She analyses these factors at length through a critical lens, which allows her to detect and comment on intricate layers in the production and reception matrix of the subgenre. She sets about to deal with the issue of representation in Chapter 9, and argues that non-Amish, Evangelical authors culturally appropriate Amish people when they fictionalize them for a mostly non-Amish readership. The narrative trope of “an English protagonist learning that she was born Amish” appears more frequently than the inverse trajectory of an Amish protagonist discovering that she/he is born English (215). However, Weaver-Zercher chooses not to pursue the precarious grounds of cultural, and religious, appropriation, and focuses instead on reading these tales as a “reaction against hypermodernity and a desire for belonging and community” (216).

The chief merit of this book lies in its representation of the evangelical, and Amish, readers’ reception of Amish romance novels. Weaver-Zercher draws upon the reader-response theory of Louise Rosenblatt, and Janice Radway’s application of that theory in the context of Harlequin category romances, to develop her conceptual framework. This study that focuses on the readers of faith and their response to a devotional subgenre, can be a useful teaching resource for broader debates on the popularity of inspirational romances.

References

Cordell, Sigrid. "Loving in Plain Sight: Amish Romance Novels as Evangelical Gothic." *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, Nov. 2013, pp. 1–16. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.18061/1811/57706.