

**Markert, John. *Publishing Romance: The History of an Industry, 1940s to the Present*. Pp. 344. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016. US\$ 29.95 (softcover). ISBN: 9780786494903.**

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Markert's work focuses on the history of romance publishing in an American context, from a business perspective. His research, explained in a modest "Methodological Note," draws on lengthy interviews with industry insiders, most especially management and editorial personnel, beginning in 1983-84 and then more recently in 2013-14, at all of the major romance publishing houses. I have never met Markert but assume from the frank comments of his interviewees that he has considerable interpersonal skill and helped these people feel expansive; the segments he quotes from Vivian Stephens, in particular, make me wish that we had access to the full interviews. He uses this material to weave together a compelling history of the romance publishing wars. This 1980s scramble for market share is also the origin story for category romance, and it forms the heart of the book, from Chapters 3-8. Markert touches on lines that were proposed, produced or ignored, and succeeded or failed, all viewed through the lens of marketing theory and the perspectives of the people who saw those books to print. The research here will help future romance scholars apply the "genre worlds" approach outlined by Lisa Fletcher et al. to new studies of twentieth-century romance novels, and it demonstrates why such an approach is vital. Few other published books offer such a thorough overview of the romance publishing industry, and of those most are focused on a single publisher (such as Jay Dixon's *The Romance Fiction of Mills & Boon* and Jensen's *Love's Sweet Return*). This does not, however, reflect a lack of interest; I know more than one scholar who has worked with archival material from the major romance publishers yet not been granted permission to publish their findings. Further, while *Publishing Romance* is not a theory-heavy work, it explores some concepts useful for romance scholars, particularly gatekeeping, innovation, and marketing strategies. For all those reasons, this book makes an important contribution to the field.

Turning from content to form, anyone who has tried to use Paul Grescoe's meandering, un-footnoted *The Merchants of Venus* for background research will be grateful for Markert's conscientious organization. Chapters are structured chronologically, with names that give some indication of their content. Topic shifts within chapters are marked with subheadings, and, best of all, each chapter offers a conclusion that devotes several pages

to a thorough review of the contents, like an abstract placed at the end rather than the beginning. Secondary research provides enough background on the development of the paperback market and the early years of Harlequin that readers looking for an overview will not have to consult other sources. If they want those other sources, however, the book provides a bibliography, a useful index, and chatty endnotes that give insight into Markert's reasoning. Chapter 8 provides a handy timeline of Harlequin series, extended to the present (which was presumably 2016). For academics who teach courses about the popular romance, the writing style of *Publishing Romance* will make it accessible to undergraduates.

Readers looking for literary analysis or insight into audience and authors will not find much here. As Markert announces in the introduction, he plans to focus on "the key role of decision makers within the industry," not on novels (5). This doesn't seem problematic to me: many romance scholars come from the humanities, and analyzing novels is a skill we already have. However, a more frustrating issue is the lack of serious analysis about the social context in which this publishing history takes place. Markert makes reference to feminism and changing gender roles, but the sweeping advance of women as editors in the romance publishing industry is covered in two pages in Chapter 5 (see 93-94). The section entitled "Another Kind of Love" (see 231-242), on LGBTQ romance publishing, treats the straight female readership of m/m romance as a "trend" instead of a phenomenon that invites analysis. Turning to the issue of race, while America's romance community today is roiling from the effects of systematic racism, the section addressing African-American and multicultural romance ("Love across the Color Spectrum," 242-251) stays at the level of reporting, with little questioning of explanations others have given. For example, more than once, the book relies on the easy assumption that of course White readers would have no interest in a book or book cover featuring Black characters. It is impossible to read this and not think of Beverly Jenkins' take on White readers: "When people say, 'I don't know if I can relate to that,' I think, 'But you relate to werewolves and vampires and shape-shifters and all kinds of other craziness. Why can't you relate to people who are a different race?'" (qtd. in Jordan).

This book was published in 2016 and was probably in the works by 2014. The extent of racism in the romance community was more invisible to outsiders at that time, or at least it was easier for White people, including me, to overlook. That's how white privilege works. After the Ripped Bodice released its first *State of Racial Diversity in Romance Publishing Report* in 2016, after Alyssa Cole's award-winning *An Extraordinary Union* could not break through the color barrier of the RITA awards, and after many romance writers and readers have tweeted, blogged, and presented eloquently about systemic racism in Romancelandia, even the thickest blinkers can't disguise that understanding popular romance requires confronting its racism. I read Markert's book from the perspective of those intervening years, and perhaps that is not completely fair. Nevertheless, the book's myopic treatment of the experience and perspectives of Black women in romance publishing feels like a missed opportunity. For example, I would love to learn more about his conversations with Vivian Stephens about her years as an editor, an agent, and a founder of the RWA. I hope that Markert returns to his rich trove of interviews for further publications, to investigate what they have to tell us about the dynamics of gender, race, and publishing in the second half of the twentieth century.

## Works Cited

- Fletcher, Lisa, Beth Driscoll, and Kim Wilkins. "Genre Worlds and Popular Fiction: The Case of Twenty-First-Century Australian Romance." *Journal of Popular Culture* 51.4 (2018): 997-1015.
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