

**Janet G. Casey (ed). *Teaching Tainted Lit: Popular American Fiction in Today's Classroom*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015. Pp. 242. US \$27.50 (paper). ISBN: 9781609383732.**

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From the title to the overall framing of the collection, *Teaching Tainted Lit: Popular American Fiction in Today's Classroom* (2015) leans into the contested status of popular fiction: “The notion that popular literature is tainted has a distinguished history” (1). In the introduction, Janet Casey notes, “This project breaks down the long-received binaries between ‘high’ critical enterprises and ‘low’ categories of reading and writing, and between scholarly work and teaching. In an immediate way, it performs the kind of boundary dissolution that is its very subject, revealing the rewards of applying smart and incisive investigative strategies to texts and genres that have been routinely delegitimized in the academy” (11). This introduction provides a concise overview of the cultural positioning of popular literature in relation to literary fiction within academia, and posits that “to embrace the more volatile territory of the here and now is to challenge the traditional methodology of literary studies, which has generally held that some distance is necessary for appropriate evaluation; it is also to intervene actively in the process of culture formation” (12). As such, the collection invites readers to consider how literary studies is less focused on “a canon of texts but on an approach to reading,” focusing on students learning complex skills that are applicable in numerous ways (13).

*Teaching Tainted Lit* is divided into five sections; the most relevant section for romance readers, scholars, and teachers is “Gender, Romance, and Resisting Readers.” The two essays in this section explore how students respond to romance novels, and provide strategies for encouraging students to move beyond reading for enjoyment, which is often a challenge when teaching popular fiction. In “One Would Die Rather than Speak about Such Subjects: Exploring Class, Gender, and Hegemony in Anya Seton’s *Dragonwyck*,” Kathleen M. Therrien expands on the framing of the introduction by challenging the idea that there’s no “reward” in these texts, which “can be seen in the frequent use of the word ‘consume’ (as opposed to ‘read’) when popular fiction is discussed” (52). Therrien explains the challenges of teaching popular fiction and shares several successful strategies she’s used when teaching

*Dragonwyck*, like guiding students to engage with gothic romance tropes—especially the process of reading and misreading—to explore the novel and the genre itself. This works particularly well with *Dragonwyck*, which contains “a remarkably astute and self-referential commentary on the reading of popular fiction itself” (55).

The other essay in the “Gender, Romance, and Resisting Readers” section is Antonia Losano’s “Sneaking it in at the End: Teaching Popular Romance in the Liberal Arts Classroom.” Losano addresses strategies for including popular romance fiction in multi-genre courses; she acknowledges that romance genre classes may be difficult to offer due to department size, coverage needs, and limited space in individual teaching load. Given this reality, Losano chronicles iterations of her courses that include popular romance fiction. I appreciate how Losano shares challenges she faced when integrating popular romance fiction into her courses; two courses included pairing classic novels with popular romance novels (*Pride and Prejudice* with Georgette Heyer’s *Frederica*, and *Pamela* with Susan Elizabeth Phillips’ *Nobody’s Baby but Mine*). In both courses she “failed to convince students that popular romances are part of a long literary tradition; indeed, I failed to engage them with the popular romance in any meaningful way” (83). Other attempts were more successful, as when she taught *The Sheik* in a course unit on Orientalism, or when she taught a Nora Roberts novel without including the popular romance framing. She shares details about her most successful course: a literary theory course in which students studied four “touchstone” texts, including Jennifer Crusie’s *Welcome to Temptation*, to explore how criticism shifts over time. Losano questions whether incorporating popular fiction into courses or teaching it in stand-alone courses is more effective, concluding that “If we teach stand-alone course on popular culture (whatever the genre), we run the risk of isolating and encrypting the very genres we are trying to validate [...] To avoid this problem, I would argue that romance (and by extension other forms of popular literature) can and should be folded into the fabric of the academic canon. A course *just* on popular romance runs the risk of isolating and marginalizing the genre—as if we were trying to keep it from infecting the canonical survey” (84). This is an interesting and compelling debate that has shaped literary curriculum in many ways—what literature deserves a course of its own? Can we advocate for *both* the incorporation model and stand-alone courses?

There are two additional chapters in this volume that are popular romance adjacent. Jolene Hubbs’ “Chick Lit and Southern Studies” argues for the usefulness of chick lit to think about identity and representation in the media, especially of Asian American and/or bi-racial Southerners. She posits that “Chick Lit’s insistent contemporaneity throws into sharp relief the way in which other popular cultural representations of the South define the region not by its present but by its past. For this reason, the novel can help students critically engage the question of why the pictures of the South repeatedly used to sell books, films, and television programs is an image of the old South” (93). Hubbs’ essay focuses on her experience teaching Cara Lockwood’s novel *Dixieland Sushi* (2005) “to illustrate how chick lit can enrich courses on the literature and culture of the US South” (92). Hubbs uses cover analysis and some of the “reel South” stereotypes mentioned by characters in the novel—*Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Dukes of Hazard*, among others—to encourage students to discuss “viewers’ appetites for backwoods folks with backward ways” (96). Because *Dixieland Sushi*’s protagonist Jen is Japanese American and Southern, “the novel ultimately can move class discussions beyond regional stereotypes into broader questions of identity construction and identification” (97).

Finally, Derek McGrath's article "Teaching Bad Romance: Poe's Women, the Gothic, and Lady Gaga" makes the case for teaching Lady Gaga's music video for "Bad Romance" in conjunction with Edgar Allan Poe's fiction. Of particular interest to those in the popular romance community is how McGrath encourages students to think about genre and gender: "Although Lady Gaga's use of the word *romance* speaks largely to a sexual relationship, as is often the case in Poe's literature, the word also prompts the class to reconsider the issues of the romance as a dominant literary genre in the nineteenth century" (124). McGrath's essay interweaves analysis of Poe and Lady Gaga's gothic romances with descriptions of the course and a few scattered student analyses. Like the other works in the collection, McGrath provides a model for how to interrogate form and content of popular romance adjacent works.

*Teaching Tainted Lit* is an engaging collection that showcases a variety of approaches to including popular fiction in the college class. Most of the articles summarized above describe the rationale for teaching popular romance in particular contexts, while offering limited practical applications. In that sense, I would categorize this collection as focusing more on *why* to teach popular fiction rather than *how*. Readers who are more interested in detailed teaching strategies, assignments, and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) approaches to teaching romance may be disappointed by this collection. It's also worth considering if continually positioning popular fiction in a contested position aids and/or hinders the cause of greater inclusion of genre fiction. What if teachers of popular fiction simply included popular fiction without this framework of justification? What conditions do we need within literature departments to allow professors of all ranks to include genre fiction in their courses? How might we reimagine literature curriculum on a programmatic level to make space for "tainted lit"? These questions hover around the edges of these essays, and invite their own consideration.