

Paige, Lori A. *The Gothic Romance Wave: A Critical History of the Mass Market Novels, 1960-1993*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers 2018 pp. 185. USA £46.95 (paper). ISBN (print) 978-1-4766-7565-7. ISBN (ebook) 978-1-4766-3417-3.

Review by Valerie Grace Derbyshire

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Swirling fog surrounds the young woman as she makes her way along the threadlike path that leads to the tall iron gates that rise toward the inky sky, their angry spikes silhouetted against an eerie full moon. (1)

Thus begins Lori A. Paige's homage to the mass market gothic romance novels of the 1960s onwards, and from the very outset, Paige's work reads as an extended love letter to the novels themselves. It is clear from the Preface that Paige has taken a great deal of pleasure in the creation of her *Critical History of the Mass Market Novels*, and there is equally a great deal of pleasure to be derived from reading it. Paige's knowledge of the authors and their books in the genre is encyclopaedic, and this text is filled with fascinating and entertaining facts about it. The Preface sets out the *raison d'être* of the study by introducing the subject of the first gothic wave in literature and the works of authors Horace Walpole (1717-1797), Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823) and Clara Reeve (1729-1807). From there, Paige lays out her strategy as follows:

...the present study seeks to write the missing chapters of the gothic story by placing it back into this framework, restoring it to its proper context, and enumerating the sound critical and aesthetic reasons for doing so. In particular, the late 20th century gothic will be examined in its cultural context, which encompasses feminism, Vietnam, youth culture, the sexual revolution, and the growth of the modern media and mass market publishing. (7)

The book itself does exactly what it says on the cover. It is a comprehensive critical history of these novels from 1960-1993, using the history of the gothic from the eighteenth-century onwards, to contemporaneous social history, alongside publishing history, to contextualise

the content of gothic romances. Students of social and publishing history are going to find this contribution to the scholarship extremely beneficial. The chapters cover a vast range of issues pertaining to these books, including the cover art, the broad demographic of the readers, the tendency of male authors to conceal their identities behind female pseudonyms and the earning power of individual novelists. What it does not do is provide much literary analysis of the texts discussed and what critical analysis there is appears as a mere scratching of the surface rather than a detailed discussion of any one text. As a literary scholar, I found this somewhat dissatisfying, but it is perhaps not the intention of this study. The sheer volume of the mass market publishing trade and the number of novels that Paige considers, covering, as Paige describes it, “half a dozen tables and shelves, filling an entire academic office” (7) probably renders any detailed discussion of individual novels impractical. However, this does mean that although readings of the texts recognise that their publication dates place them as overlapping with key themes, such as, for example, second-wave feminism, there is little actual detailed discussion of how this appears within them. One other slight criticism is that there is also a reliance on the same authors to provide the contextual background to the more contemporary gothic romances discussed and the repeated mentions and use of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Rebecca* became a little wearisome at times. The gothic is such a huge genre, sprawling across so many texts, whether they be considered as classic literature or otherwise, it seemed somewhat limiting to only reflect upon these few in order to illustrate the links between the past and more contemporaneous gothic texts.

Chapter One, “The Gathering Mist”, begins with a “definition of the term” Gothic “as the researcher plans to use it” (9), and immediately recognises that this is no simple task, bearing in mind the broad range of classifications attributed to the term. Paige begins by listing some authors who perhaps form the basis for the gothic canon of literature, i.e., Ann Radcliffe, Bram Stoker (1847-1912) progressing through works like *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Rebecca* (1938), before touching briefly upon the works of Stephen King (1947-) and Anne Rice (1941-2021). Paige states that in the context of the gothic, these texts “are often mentioned” (10), as they are, indeed, in this text. As I have observed, there is a reliance on the same major authors and texts to support Paige’s arguments and little diversity in the classic literary gothic texts discussed throughout this book. The final entry in Paige’s list defining the genre is the one that forms the background for the discussion. This is defined as:

A subgenre of popular women’s romance fiction with standardized covers and titles, with plots generally based on variations of *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*. The genre achieved incredible popularity in the mid-1960s and retained a devoted following until 1993, when the Zebra line, the last to bear the “gothic” label on the spine sputtered out. (10)

From this initial list of definitions, Paige astutely recognises that all of the descriptions of what comprises the gothic “are connected at some level” (10), and from there Chapter One presents a very entertaining history of the genre. However, it is not just an overview of what it means for a text to be gothic. The chapter also contains information regarding the tropes and formulas relied upon by the authors, via a brief discussion of Mills & Boons and the “Nursie” novels of the 1940s to 1960s. Paige takes the reader upon a truly entertaining

journey here, and the opening chapter is packed with facts which any scholar of popular romance, popular culture or book publishing history is going to find incredibly informative.

Chapter Two, “Shadowed Beginnings” focuses upon popular gothic literature from 1764 to 1840, offering a history of the gothic commencing with what is generally regarded as the first gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). It then continues through a survey of Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1795) through to Jane Austen’s satirical gothic in *Northanger Abbey* (1817) to Stephanie Meyer’s incredibly popular *Twilight* (2005). There is some discussion of William Lane’s Minerva Press formed in the 1780s, as well as the critical response to and reader reception of these types of books. Consumers are—in spite of Henry Tilney’s professed enjoyment of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* within *Northanger Abbey*—according to Paige, “largely female” (24) and the inevitable literary critics who “disparage and lampoon” (23) the genre “usually, but not always, male” (24). This paves the way for a discussion of the value of the genre and “how little the participants’ attitudes and genders have changed” to these types of books “over the intervening centuries” (24). Within romance scholarship, there has historically and continues to be much debate surrounding whether these texts could represent feminism in any kind of way. Here Paige touches upon this argument, highlighting the amount of feminine agency within these texts and how Emily St. Aubert, for example, engineers her own marriage in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

Chapter Three “A Dark Blossom” continues the review of classic gothic literature, this time dating from 1840-1960. The chapter describes the route from the gothic of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) to Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, right up to the works of Eleanor Hibbert, better known as Victoria Holt (1906-1993). The persistent popularity of the genre is attributed to clever marketing strategies which were characterised by the production of mass-produced and inexpensive copies, and thus contributed to their popularity with readers. Paige demonstrates clearly the provenance between books such as Holt’s first gothic novel under the Victoria Holt pen-name, *Mistress of Mellyn* (1960) from Du Maurier’s *Rebecca*. Holt managed, Paige reports, to invoke “the spirit of *Rebecca* so completely that many speculated Daphne Du Maurier had written it under a pseudonym” (51). Paige also shows how the cover art used for this novel—the familiar motif of the young woman fleeing a castle clad in a billowing white nightgown—would come to feature on later editions of *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* when they were reissued, demonstrating how within readers’ minds, the stories had become linked. Again, here, there is fascinating historical information to be discovered, but, as noted earlier, very little literary criticism of Holt’s *Mistress of Mellyn*, or, indeed, any of the gothic texts discussed.

Chapter Four “Gothic Flower Power” brings the discussion into the period identified by the title of the book, considering the novels issued between 1960-1970. The territory, again, is sweeping and a huge number of writers and novels are discussed, concluding with a particularly entertaining discussion of the novelisation and television series, *Dark Shadows*. Of course, there are an enormous number of novels to consider in this genre, but the lack of detailed literary discussion of any of the texts was a little disappointing for me. The pace of ground being covered reminded me of the gothic novels themselves—it was a little like being in an out-of-control horse-drawn carriage, where occasional glimpses of the gothic scenery are afforded to the reader, but no opportunity to stop and consider them in a more detailed manner. The pace is furious, but Paige writes with real passion for her subject, and covers the ground with panache.

Within Chapter Five, “Gilded Peak and Gloomy Valley: 1970s Gothic”, this theme continues, and the territory covered is so broad, that it starts to feel to the reader a little like a list of books, rather than a detailed discussion. The chapter opens with the political situation in America forming the backdrop to these novels but disappointingly does not pursue this line in reading the politics into the texts themselves. Rather it provides a detailed history of the many publishers now contributing to the gothic wave of mass market paperbacks including Avon, Unibooks, Bantam Gothics, Candlelight Gothics and Fawcett Crest amongst many others. At this point in the text, the research is of undisputable value to book and publishing historians, but again, there is hardly any detailed literary analysis to be discerned.

Chapter Six, “Destined for Darkness”, discusses the gothic heroine in detail and identifies the many tropes that readers of these novels may encounter, once again using *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* as reference points. Here Paige provides some discussion of how these novels sit within the context of feminism, discussing the earlier research of Janice Radway and Tania Modleski. Paige accesses the same argument as many others preceding her, including Laura Vivanco, showing that at the resolution of these romantic novels, there is the “prospect of an equal marriage” (102). Like Vivanco, who argues that “the heroine’s final triumph represent[s] a victory against patriarchal oppression of women” (Vivanco 1068), in these stories, Paige identifies how the “heroine’s achievement and the hero’s capacity to love seem that much greater when juxtaposed against the backdrop of a male-dominated world” (102).

After detailed consideration of the gothic heroine, it is only fair in the interests of equality to consider the nature of the gothic hero in Chapter Seven “Melancholy Males and Demon Lovers.” Again, this chapter uses the works of the Brontë sisters and Radcliffe to contextualise the argument and by this stage in the text, it feels a little wearisome to keep reverting back to the same gothic classics every time. However, this minor criticism can be forgiven, bearing in mind the broad range of knowledge that Paige demonstrates around these gothic romances. In a spirited discussion of Victoria Holt’s *The Time of the Hunter’s Moon* (1983)—a novel I distinctly remember thoroughly enjoying—Paige provides an entertaining description of the novel’s hero, Jason, and his thwarted attempt to rape the heroine Cordelia, leading to him spending “the rest of the book apologizing” (118). Paige’s analysis of the typical hero of these gothic mass-market paperbacks, again shows clearly that provenance from “the loud, passionate men of the Brontës” through the heroes of Victoria Holt to the “21st century’s paranormal romances, with vampire and werewolf heroes” (119).

Chapter Eight, entitled “Numinous Melodrama” focuses upon “The Appeal of the Gothic” and, once again, brings the argument back to a consideration of Radcliffe’s *Udolpho*. This chapter spends some time discussing the settings of these gothic romances with the feature of the castle particularly being discussed in detail, with the gothic romances making “full use of all [the castle’s] features, as well as hidden rooms, secret, dungeons and booby-trapped doors that lead to a deadly plunge down a castle wall” (125). Whilst many critics have perceived the castle as a patriarchal symbol in novels such as *Udolpho*, reading it as a “representation of patriarchy” and “thus, symbol of women’s domestic captivity and subjugation” (Girten, 715), Paige rather understands it to be as Loraine Fletcher reads the castle in *Emmeline, the Orphan of the Castle* (1788), as a “symbol of the maternal body” (125). Paige also uses this chapter to discuss reader reception further and overturn the popular views of the critics. In her discussion of the *Gothic Journal*, a publication which was in print

from 1991 to 1998, Paige highlights how both female “and a few men” fans contributed to the journal “to articulate their preferences”:

No one in the journal’s entire run ever longed for books featuring more passive or dim-witted heroines or begged authors to make their heroes more brutish. Not a single contributor expressed relief or gratitude at being put in her place by the machinations of patriarchal publishers and conspiring authors. If anything, they complained about exactly those things scholars insisted they loved to read and were probably addicted to: “dumb” heroines who found fulfilment in the arms of domineering men and repetitive, predictable storylines. (125)

Chapter Nine, “The Flame and the Pitchfork” continues the theme of reader reception but also provides some intriguing insights into just how much authors of these gothic romances were being paid for their work (for example, Dean Koontz, when he was struggling financially after the market for science fiction and horror “temporarily dried up” wrote one gothic romance “in two weeks and another in one week, earning \$1500 for the first and \$1750 for the second.” The figures in 1972 dollars is worth around \$29,300 in 2017) (137). This demonstrates clearly that whatever the critical reception of these novels, their mass market appeal made them financially very rewarding indeed for authors. This is true across the popular romance genre. When Sara Craven, for example, wrote her first romance for Mills & Boon, she was immediately approached by the company for a second novel. Feeling that she had achieved her ambition at this stage, she informed Allan Boon that she didn’t need the money because she already had a job. Craven reports of this incident in her writing career: “I told him I earned a good salary and he asked how much that was. I can’t remember what it was now, but when I told him he just said, ‘chicken feed’. He was right.” (Craven, cited in Howarth). Again, this delving into the earning power of these romance writers is interesting, for scholars of book history or popular culture.

Finally, putting slight feelings of envy aside at this earning power, Paige leads the reader with her usual panache through her concluding chapter “Fading Shadows: Where did the Gothics Go?”, which relates some history pertaining to one of Mary Stewart’s final novels *The Stormy Petrel* and the end of the apparent popular appeal of these gothic romances.

Each of these chapters commences with a quotation from one of the gothic romance novels that Paige has considered, and every reader who is familiar with and has enjoyed the genre will instantly recognise the style of the writing in these quotations. You may—as I did—even find yourself asking “have I read this one? It seems familiar...” Although there are limitations within Paige’s *Critical History* as outlined earlier, overall, this book afforded me a huge amount of pleasure to read and I would recommend it to anyone who is interested in the study of popular romance, popular culture and the gothic. Paige, as I have mentioned, writes with passion and verve, and her enthusiasm for her subject is infectious. So much joy seems to be gained from the reading and study of the novels, that at the very beginning of the book, the author asks “surely scholarship should not be so entertaining. Was I doing it wrong?” (8) My answer to this is “definitely not”. If only all scholarship was so entertaining.

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