

**Chen, Angela. *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2020. Pp. 226. US \$26.95 (hardcover), \$15.95 (paperback), \$20.00 (audio).**

**Przybylo, Ela. *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2019. Pp. 210. US \$89.95 (hardcover), \$29.95 (paperback), \$29.95 (pdf ebook).**

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At first sight, it is perhaps unclear why popular romance scholars should invest in these two books in the face of other demands on our time. While a few romance novels with asexual lead characters (as well as ace-adjacent orientations, such as demisexual and gray-sexual) are being (self)published, they remain a tiny sub-genre within the already minority non-MF romance. Moreover, these two works study asexuality from a predominantly sociological or gender and sexuality perspective rather than through literary or cultural studies lenses. However, I will argue these books offer two broad benefits for romance scholars: firstly, each provides a nuanced emic perspective on asexual lived experience written for an etic audience, and secondly, reading between their lines may reveal the contours of a fresh way by which to process our raw commodity: fictional depictions of romantic relationships.

Science and technology journalist, Angela Chen, has produced a popular science account of asexuality based on personal experience and nearly 100 interviews. In the first of three parts—‘Self’—Chen recounts her own and others’ journeys to an asexual identity, interleaved with discussing the development, definitions, and contradictions of the ‘ace world’ spectrum. In doing so, she refers to “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (Rich) in defining ‘compulsory sexuality’ as

a set of assumptions and behaviors that support the idea that every normal person is sexual, that not wanting (socially approved) sex is unnatural and

wrong, and that people who don't care about sexuality are missing out on an utterly necessary experience. (Chen 35)

Part two—'Variations on a theme'—draws further on individual experience to explore the intersection of asexuality with forms of oppression such as sexism, racism, agism, ableism, and transphobia, before tracing the pathologizing of asexuality. Part three—'Others'—expands beyond a strictly asexual perspective to consider romantic orientation, sexual consent, and relationship types before advocating for ace liberation to facilitate sexual and romantic freedom for all. Chen's readable approach is borne out by the book's positive critical reception, not only from scholars (Wenzel), but also reviews in *The Washington Post* (Neilson), and *The New York Times* (Mlotek), being named one of 2020's best books by *NPR*, being the top pick on the American Library Association's *2021 Over the Rainbow Booklist*, and having 9,437 Goodreads ratings and 1,994 reviews (as of 19 December 2022).

Written for an academic audience and receiving positive scholarly reviews (Carroll; Dee), it is perhaps not surprising that Ela Przybylo's work has attracted less Goodreads attention, with only 63 ratings and 13 reviews. Like Chen, Przybylo draws on Rich's work to develop a framework that layers compulsory sexuality—"the ways in which sexuality is presumed to be natural and normal to the detriment of various forms of asexual and nonsexual lives, relationships, and identities" (Przybylo 1)—with erotics (Lorde) (although neither Przybylo nor Chen profited from drawing on related work in our field on compulsory demisexuality (McAlister)). Ranging from the late 1960s to the present, Przybylo's four main chapters examine asexuality through a specific lens—political celibacy, lesbian relationships, childhood, then older adulthood—followed by an epilogue on violence by incels (involuntary celibates), which she recasts as anti-erotic, tyrannical celibacy. Despite their different target audiences, Przybylo covers many of the same topics as Chen, including the pathologizing of asexuality, discrimination through sexism, racism, agism, and ableism, and particularly rethinking relationships beyond sex into non-standard modes of relating and relationality.

Just as Chen reflects on what it means to be in a relationship and the role sex does (not) play, Przybylo asks: "how can we rethink relating when we read it asexually, rather than with an investment in the promises of sex and in the sexual universal?" (26): a thought experiment that readers of this journal may find fruitful.

But before developing this theme, I will defend my position that there is little content directly relevant to the study of asexuality in popular romance media. In her second chapter, Przybylo uses fictional media to illustrate her arguments but concentrates on two representations of lesbian bed death in a television drama series and a film. She does also list fictional "[c]anonized examples of asexuality includ[ing] characters and representations such as Todd Chavez on *BoJack Horseman*, Jughead Jones in the comic series *Archie*, *Doctor Who*, Sheldon Cooper on *The Big Bang Theory*, *Sherlock Holmes*, and the first asexual character featured on mainstream TV, Gerald Tippet, on the New Zealand soap opera *Shortland Street*" (15), although, as Chen (76) points out, while *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock Holmes* are sometimes read as ace, this is only inferred from their reserved and rational miens. Przybylo's list intersects with Chen's set of sympathetic television portrayals of ace characters—Varys from *Game of Thrones*, Raphael Santiago from *Shadowhunters*, and Todd Chavez from *BoJack Horseman* (74-75)—which Chen offsets against a(n infamous) 2012 *House* episode ('Better Half') in which an asexual couple is 'cured'; a remediation necessary

because, according to Dr Gregory House, sex is “the fundamental drive of our species, sex is healthy [and] the only people who don’t want it are either sick, dead, or lying” (Chen 88; Przybylo 17).

Even if Chen makes little reference to fictional sources, two of her chapters inform the study of queer romance (fiction). Chapter 7, ‘Romance, reconsidered’, delves into the difference between sexual and romantic orientations—disconnecting sexual desire from infatuation, emotional intimacy, and romantic attachment—and investigates platonic versus romantic love before outlining the legal and societal implications of various (a)sexual / (a)romantic combinations. Similarly, chapter 9, ‘Playing with others’, contemplates permutations increasingly found in queer romance fiction, such as open, kinky, and/or polygamous relationships.

Earlier, I suggested these books offer a new perspective on popular romance scholarship. This is encapsulated in a section of Chen’s book on the ubiquity of romantic plotlines in literature, in which she outlines a four-criteria Bechdel-type test for fiction *without* romance:

1. The novel is not young adult fiction or science fiction/fantasy. (There are plenty of YA books without romantic subplots, both because intended readers are younger and because recent YA authors are more likely to incorporate characters along the sexuality spectrum.)
2. The novel is not about romance, and romance — or yearning for romance — isn’t a major plot point even if it’s there. Maybe there’s a couple, but their relationship is taken for granted and the book doesn’t focus on its evolution. Maybe someone goes on a date, but dating doesn’t move the story forward.
3. The novel has no explicit sex scenes or sexual themes (including sexual assault).
4. The novel doesn’t present romantic love as necessary and central to flourishing. This last requirement is crucial. Even if there are no sex scenes and nobody goes on a date, if the main character is constantly thinking about how they should be dating, the novel is disqualified. (Chen 125)

Chen then bemoans how few novels meet these criteria, and warns that:

If accurate representation matters when it comes to class and race and gender (and it does), representation also matters when it comes to storylines, the narratives that are present about what matters, what people want and should want, and what is necessary for a good life [...] The ubiquity of romantic subplots, even in books that aren’t romance novels, suggest[s] that only stories with romance can involve big emotions and that romance is automatically more interesting than almost all the other strands of human experience [...] Romance is so taken for granted that we often don’t register it, the way we rarely register if all the characters in a novel are white. This message affects our values and our hopes, all while fading so cleanly into the background that it’s barely even evident. (Chen 126–27)

The conclusions Chen draws from her four-criteria test leave me torn. As an asexual aromantic, I too lament this lack of representation. But, by delineating the contours of (an

absence of) asexual representation in literature, Chen simultaneously outlines the far greater negative space occupied by romance. Therefore, as a popular romance scholar, I sense opportunity. Why not invert Chen's test and vaunt this omnipresence of romance to colleagues immured in 'serious' literature? Why not advocate for media deprecated as popular romance, chic lit, or women's fiction to enter the canon?

Even if I have not convinced you to heft this tilting-lance, Chen's and Przybylo's books offer a popular or academic primer respectively for etic scholars seeking to expand their understanding of this less-well-known band of the queer spectrum and to consider the implications and effects of disentangling sex from romance.

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