

McAlister, Jodi, Claire Parnell, and Andrea Anne Trinidad. *Publishing Romance Fiction in the Philippines*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 94. US \$19.00 (paperback and ebook). ISBN: 9781009096430.

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Romance fiction is a significant part of the global publishing industry. However, its dynamics beyond Anglo-American contexts remain underexplored. *Publishing Romance Fiction in the Philippines* seeks to correct this serious imbalance by not only looking at the Anglo-American romance publishing dynamics but also at a vibrant locally based publishing ecosystem. As part of the *Elements in Publishing and Book Culture* series by Cambridge University Press, this book provides a methodologically varied study of Filipino romance publishing, thus highlighting the industrial organisation, media relationships, and community practices of this genre. Furthermore, it significantly intervenes in popular romance studies and becomes a means of contributing to the broader decolonial debates within publishing research.

The authors present romance fiction not merely as a literary genre but as a cultural, industrial, and artistic system. They note, “Romance fiction in the Philippines is also closely connected to the platform and entertainment media industries and encompasses diverse and unique Filipino reception practices” (2). The authors call it the central task of the book to provide “a detailed picture of this complicated sector of publishing and book culture” (2). Such a broad conceptualisation allows the authors to move beyond textual studies of romance and to look at romance as a performance that gets manifested through print, digital platforms, and entertainment media, thus revealing the genre’s deep immersion into everyday cultural consumption.

One of the major strengths of the study lies in its clear focus on decentring the Western paradigms of romance scholarship. Through an analysis of romance fiction written in the Philippines for a predominantly Filipino audience, the authors aim, “to contribute to decolonisation efforts in publishing and popular romance studies through decentring the West” (3). Despite the fact that they recognise Anglo-American romance publishing as a

dominant force, they still contend that Filipino romance should be understood “in its own context and on its own terms: specifically, as a distinctive genre world” (5). This methodological approach challenges the attitude of assuming that non-Western romance markets are only imitative and thus, it puts local histories, tastes, and industrial logics at the forefront.

The volume is very aware of how difficult it is to research romance publishing in the Philippines. The authors note that it is a “dispersed ecosystem of production models, media forms, and reception sites and practices” (3) and they quote, “there is little research on romance publishing, or even book publishing more broadly, in the Philippines” (3). According to them, romance fiction occupies a position of “double invisibility” in Philippine literary scholarship as it is “often overlooked in favour of more serious and canonical literature” (3). The study, therefore, repositions itself as a scholarly recovery that recounts a culturally significant yet critically overlooked sector.

The first chapter starts with the historical and socio-political context. The authors delve into detail to show the ways in which Filipino romance publishing has, over the years, been influenced and shaped by factors such as colonial legacies and class divisions that have been in place for a long time. They argue that “the historical and current social, economic, and political conditions of the Philippines greatly impact its publishing culture” (5), affecting, among other things, which languages are used and how distribution networks are set up. Socio-economic stratification was specifically singled out, as “the socio-economic make-up of the Philippines has been an influential factor in the production and reception of romance fiction throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (6), thus determining who is the reader of romance, in what language and through what means or formats.

The authors analyse the significance of language. The text points to “a complex interplay of language, class, and taste between the romance genre and its Filipino audience” (6). While English-language romance, influenced by American colonial education, targets middle and upper-class families, the use of Tagalog and Taglish romances targets a wide audience in the mass market. These language considerations have a significant effect on the definition of authenticity and literary value, because romance publishing happens within a cultural framework that establishes a hierarchy.

Chapter Two explores love story literature in this industrial setting, concentrating on the difference between Tagalog pocketbook romances and English-language #RomanceClass novels. The authors note that Tagalog/Taglish romance fiction “has been a local powerhouse since its introduction in the mid-1980s and continues to be a major selling and dominant part of the Filipino publishing industry” (12). Pocketbook romances remain very much in vogue because they are inexpensive and serialised. On the other hand, English language romances under #RomanceClass expand the market by experimenting with different forms of narrative techniques due to the new desires being shaped in the local publishing industry.

Digital platforms are becoming the main source of change in the Filipino romance world. The authors state that “digital platforms have radically transformed the Filipino publishing industry in the early twenty-first century” (18), fundamentally transforming how romance is written, distributed, and consumed. Platforms such as Wattpad and Pop Fiction have opened new paths for authorial visibility and reader engagement as well as making cross-media adaptation effortless. The study mentions that “the romance publishing industry in the Philippines is especially notable for its close connection with other media sectors” (21),

where romance narratives, across Tagalog/Taglish and English-language traditions, are often adapted for film, television, and streaming services.

The final chapter's focus on #RomanceClass as a self-publishing collective is the volume's original contribution. The authors used mixed methods such as interviews and ethnographic fieldwork along with statistical methods to show how sociality, care, and collaboration are the founding elements of this publishing community. Their research approach is a blend of "qualitative and quantitative and primary and secondary data" (9) to figure out the complexity of their multi-site genre world. Through obtaining pictures which capture scenes at the coffee shops, bookstores, and malls, the authors are signalling that romance publishing is more than just a purely commercial enterprise. It is essentially a sociocultural practice that people actively participate in.

The volume is quite short and hence there was no room to explore the analysis of individual texts. Moreover, this approach only suits the intention of the method: mapping the publishing ecosystems instead of doing the literary analysis. The book gives an organised portrayal of the romance publishing world as part of Philippine literature and culture.

This volume explores the significant role that romantic stories play in the reading habits of Filipinos. It is mainly about the stories of Filipina women's lives and their feelings. The book avoids simplistic, oversimplified, and Eurocentric stereotypes. However, it gives an authentic portrayal of the romance publication industry in the Philippines. The book is of interest for scholars interested in romance literature, publishing, or media industries.