

Pierini, Francesca. *Romancing Literature: When Literary Fiction Meets Genre*. Routledge, 2026. Pp. 124. US \$71.99 (hardback). ISBN: 9781041289821.

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Although they are often treated very differently, the fields of literary fiction and genre fiction (including romance) have no neat demarcations between them. One might view these fields as a spectrum, rather than as separate categories, with some texts at far ends of the spectrum, and some with significant overlap. But the two fields are not accorded the same value, and they are subject to value judgements infused by biases about gender and class, among other things. Francesca Pierini's new monograph *Romancing Literature: When Literary Fiction Meets Genre* is a timely, comprehensive and very welcome look at the dynamics of literary fiction and the romance genre in relation to each other.

In the opening chapter, Pierini considers the relationship between literary fiction and other genres from a theoretical perspective and, drawing on Bourdieu's insights on cultural tastes and social judgements, places different theoretical approaches in conversation with each other. Although literature scholarship has seen a so-called 'genre turn' in recent years, most scholarship that is afforded recognition or value in academic circles is limited to a cluster of traditionally male coded genres, including science fiction, fantasy, horror, crime and detective fiction, and as yet this continues to exclude genres more associated with the female domain such as Young Adult, romance and historical fiction. What is more, in literary novels that engage with the genre of romance, scholarship and criticism alike tend to overlook or sidestep what Pierini terms the "literary construction of love" (6). This book offers an academically rigorous, engaging, and very stimulating exploration of the questions that arise at the juncture of literary fiction and the romance genre, and demonstrates what we can gain if we read literary love stories through a lens of romance scholarship, and if we give serious critical attention to their literary constructions of love.

Pierini examines fiction at the crossroads of literature and romance from a "decentred" position and by substantially drawing on insights from romance genre scholarship. One of the goals of the study, Pierini makes explicit, is "to cast light on how

literary fiction, even as it narrates love stories, performs its distancing from generic forms perceived as ‘feminine and popular’” (6). Another is to broaden the scope of literary critics engaging with genre fiction by examining literary texts from the vantage point of romance scholarship. Pierini’s objective with this study, she is keen to make clear, “is not at all that of rehabilitating generic fiction against literary fiction, praising the literary values of the former against the latter, or vice versa: questioning literary fiction as a valid literary domain. It is to show, in concrete instances of textual analysis, the importance and productivity of their coexistence, which, despite being an essential characteristic by now largely acknowledged, remains under-analyzed in its textual materializations” (8).

In the book’s Introduction, Pierini examines the narrative strategies of three literary novels that have a love story at the centre: E.M. Forster’s *A Room with a View* (1908), John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) and A.S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990). She argues that the latter two are prototypes of postmodern romantic fiction that contributed significantly to the resurrection of romantic fiction after the long hiatus (including two world wars and their aftermaths) that followed Forster’s novel. Pierini analyses the ways in which both texts decide to resolve what she terms “the allegedly naïve quality of the happy ending” (9) with a dual narrative structure: one of the two narratives ends well, the other not so much. Pierini points out that this distinctly postmodern strategy displays a sense of knowingness towards both love and, in a metafictional sense, towards romantic literature, but that it also performs an act of distancing, employed by Byatt and Fowles to distance their literary novels from the happy ending of ‘ordinary’ romances. In the four chapters that follow, Pierini explores texts at the crossroads of literary and romance fiction in different constellations.

Chapter one considers three texts that take up different positions in the literary market but perform a similar literary strategy in their revisionist narration of a famous work of art. These are A.S. Byatt’s short story “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary” (1998), Tracy Chevalier’s novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999) and Jennifer Donnelly’s book chapter “Anne of Cleves,” in the young adult historical fiction collection *Fatal Throne: The Wives of Henry VIII Tell All* (2018). In each of these texts, the plot is in conversation with the artistic depiction of a young woman in a canonical painting by a male artist. These three texts, Pierini points out, are categorized in different genres: A.S. Byatt enjoys literary acclaim, Tracy Chevalier enjoys middlebrow popularity, and Jennifer Donnelly is best known for Young Adult fiction. Pierini reads these texts for the ways in which they each relate to a canonical work of art in movements of both appropriation and emancipation on the level of the protagonist and the story, but also more generally for the ways in which they relate to “the history and role of women vis-à-vis artistic creation and, by extension, the creation of a canon” (34).

The second chapter reads Sally Rooney’s *Normal People* (2018) as a romance, tracing its treatment of romantic elements via Pamela Regis’s *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003). This chapter demonstrates the high potential of a romance narrative as a form that is capacious enough to include the political and sociological questions of its context, as *Normal People* weaves together the personal and the structural in a romantic dual *bildungsroman* which follows two young people’s negotiation of their social realities with their personal desires. With this, Pierini argues, Rooney places not a person at the core of her coming-of-age novel, but a romantic relationship. While Rooney’s novel has received ample attention from both literary criticism and scholarship, its dynamics of love and

romance have been remarked upon but remain underexplored. To read it from the perspective of *romance* scholarship specifically brings out the intricate ways in which this novel engages with romantic love as a literary theme and as a force in the world.

Chapter three explores in more detail the double-coded and dual-time narratives that Byatt made famous with *Possession* as postmodern literary ‘inventions,’ and analyses Tracy Chevalier’s *The Virgin Blue* (1997) and *The Glassmaker* (2024) as well as Marina Fiorato’s *The Glassblower of Murano* (2008). All three of these novels retain the investigative plot but elaborate it into a quest for self-knowledge in a foreign setting which allows its protagonists to find love amid the “greater pursuit of existential belonging within an established and enduring social milieu” (75). The chapter also explores these texts’ treatment of the familiar trope of escaping to Italy (or elsewhere in the South of Europe) to find the answer to important existential and sentimental questions that also featured in Forster’s *A Room with a View*. Pierini points out that in both *The Glassmaker* and *The Glassblower of Murano*, Venice is “construed and constructed [...] as a space in partial discontinuity with modernity, a space of unbroken traditions still very much defined by them” (72). Pierini reads this as an expression of a meridionist perspective that characterizes many romantic stories in which an Anglo-American woman travels to Southern Europe to seek restoration from a contemporary sense of alienation and estrangement. However, while Chevalier and Fiorato both stage a return to origins, Pierini argues, Fiorato affords her protagonist progress and enlightenment in contemporary Venice (rather than a continuation of “pre-modern backwardness”), and Chevalier’s Ella judiciously avoids patronizing her new hometown and its inhabitants.

The fourth chapter discusses Erin Doom’s highly successful 2021 novel *The Tearsmith* (*Il Fabbicante di Lacrime*) in relation to its irreverent treatment of the Anglophone Gothic romantic literary tradition and the notions of pastiche and kitsch. Pierini argues that in the novel, “the lines between eclecticism, homage and plain kitsch are often blurred” (83): it starts as a Cinderella story and retains aspects of the fairy tale form throughout, but also includes elements from the Gothic, from popular romance in general and from specific contemporary YA predecessors such as *Twilight*, *It Ends with Us* and *The Fault in our Stars*. Pierini also argues that this text exemplifies what she terms, drawing on Alessandro Baricco, “a specific mutation inscribed within the larger cultural mutation in progress,” that is: literature as public domain rather than as an authoritative archive, “a vast library to be plundered, at once doing away with the rigor of the homage, the constraint of having to acknowledge a predecessor, and/or a meta-statement signaling the author’s awareness of and indebtedness to an ongoing tradition” (86).

Pierini contrasts this “barbaric” (Baricco’s term) approach to the cultural past with the approaches of A.S. Byatt, Umberto Eco, Tracy Chevalier and Donnelly discussed in the previous chapters and considers the implications of this entirely casual approach to cultural tradition, of this form of what Ingrid Hoesterey terms “incompetent pastiche.” *The Tearsmith* draws heavily on existing modes and tropes from an Anglophone literary tradition that have come to float around, divorced from that tradition, in a global, online consciousness where they are consumed and regurgitated without awareness of their origins or cultural significance. One might see this cultural “convergence” in a “post-press” literary culture (the text was originally shared on *Wattpad*) as a form of collaborative practice towards a grassroots canon, but Pierini remains troubled by the mass appeal of such flawed writing and editing, both in its aesthetic/artistic practice and in its discursive content; a novel that

is at once “overdone” and “unthought,” and that declines to take itself seriously with either clever intellectual complicity, a game of references and quotations, a polemic writing-back to its sources, or more explicit (or any) forms of homage, satire or irony (90-92).

Pierini argues that the novel may be read in light of Milan Kundera’s seminal discussion of the mode of kitsch in *The Art of the Novel* (1986), in which he describes kitsch as “the nonthought of received ideas,” that, “programmed into computers, propagated by the mass media – threaten soon to become a force that will crush all original and individual thought and thus will smother the very essence of the European culture of the Modern era” or, in short, as “the translation of the stupidity of received ideas into the language of beauty and feeling” (quoted in Pierini, 91-92). However, ultimately Pierini concludes this chapter not with a decided argument in defence of or against the novel. Instead, productively, she ends on a series of questions and considerations aimed at furthering the conversation about the ways in which kitsch intersects or interacts with literature: is kitsch a mode of writing or also sometimes a mode of reading? Do we routinely read literary fiction ‘kitschily,’ that is, without questioning the received ideas that shape our value judgements? The final chapter especially functions as a stimulating springboard for the consideration of the relationship between kitsch and romance and it will be exciting to see other romance scholars take up this consideration more explicitly in future scholarship.

In the conclusion to the book, Pierini returns to some of the central questions and motivations that underpin the chapters: to examine literary fiction that engages with the romance genre from the perspective of romance scholarship, thereby centring romance scholarship and decentring literary criticism from its hegemonic dominance; to analyse specific distancing strategies which literary fiction uses to modulate its conversation with the romance genre: by bending established formulas, by camouflaging conventions, or by plundering the archive. The book also stakes a strong claim in both literary criticism and scholarship: that as literature moves to new formations in what is termed “post-press” literature, we rethink the received ideas of the literary field and demand that a ‘genre turn’ “takes stock of all genres, give each one its due attention, and better observe their circulation in today’s world of literary expression” (98).

As a literature scholar with a particular interest in the romance genre, this call speaks loudly to my own academic experiences. The intersection of romance and literature, the ways in which each genre interacts with the genre called literary fiction, and the continued marginalized position of the romance genre in the academic ‘genre turn’ has long been a point of informal discussion among romance scholars and it is exciting to see that discussion formalized in the scholarship with such a well-informed, elaborately researched, and carefully thought-through opening salvo. Pierini’s voice is both authoritative in its erudition and open and inviting in its questioning, and this makes the book a particularly enjoyable and stimulating text. It is accessible and appealing to scholars of all levels and of all genres from undergraduate students to senior scholars, with a select glossary at the end that speaks to those who find themselves in unfamiliar waters of genre or theory.