

Luneau, Marie-Piere and Jean-Phillipe Warren (eds.). *Love Stories Now and Then. A History of Les romans d'amour*. Translated by Carmen Ruschiensky. Baraka Books, 2024. Pp. 375. \$29.95 (paperback). ISBN: 9781771863643.

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Grounded in bibliographical research, *Love Stories Now and Then* includes more than 100 romance novels, and thoughtful, contextualized descriptions and interpretations. It offers English-speaking readers a glimpse into French-Canadian (Québécois) romance novels, and works from France, England, and the United States which dominated the Québécois romance corpus and influenced its development. (Located in Eastern Canada, the province of Quebec houses approximately one quarter of Canada's population.) Insisting that love is not that spontaneous and free, Luneau's and Warren's (2024) book consists of six chapters, a preface to the English Edition, conclusion, and notes. The authors provide a comprehensive survey from the 1830s onwards, giving marginalized French-Canadian writers, especially those from the province of Quebec, a voice.

To keep this romance genre as circumscribed as possible, Luneau and Warren defined 'romance novel' by drawing on Ellen Constans' (1999) three invariants (novel must consist of a single love story whose unfolding structures the entire narrative; two protagonists are designated as a couple from the very first pages onwards and are a couple at the denouement; the unfolding narrative includes this sequence: meeting, disjunction and final conjunction). Additionally, novels had to be written in French by Quebec authors, be circulated beyond the periodical press, and published in book-format (26). Different texts that elucidate the birth of romantic imagination in Quebec were also included, because they delineate the development of Québécois romance novels from the end of the 19th century to World War II (27). Focusing on six major periods (1830-1860, 1860-1920, 1920-1940, 1940-1965, 1965-2000, since 2000), their book addresses many questions about love.

Chapter One comprises five sections that explore 'love and adventure', 'the language of love', 'the heart's reason that reason knows', 'God', and 'respectable love'. We learn that the romance genre was viewed with suspicion and its rise hampered. To illuminate its inception, Luneau and Warren take readers on a detour via gothic novels (heroine is often

the victim of a villain), adventure novels (transformation of romantic passions through fantasy adventures), novels of manners (preoccupation with individualistic morals), and short stories (love of young characters destined to end in death). Some of the included short stories synthesized Eros and Thanatos. The authors suggested that they were influenced by François-René de Chateaubriand's (1768-1848) Romanticism. He had merged theology with aesthetics, portraying the church as the seat of emotions and mystery.

The Québécois romance novels did something similar (34). Sensual passions were banished, because they were deemed unacceptable by society, Luneau and Warren surmise. Wild and untamable love was irreconcilable with the sacraments of the Catholic Church. Only socially acceptable love was possible. This resulted in marriages that were blessed by priests and fathers. Any other outcomes condemned the lovers to physical or social deaths. Passion was kept in check by Catholic values and the French-Canadian community. When the word 'love' was used, it only referred to love of God, love of one's neighbor, or love of self.

Chapter Two discusses Montréal's Jane Austen (Rosanna Leprohon), who stands out in French-Canadian literature by letting the heroine reject the husband chosen by her father without being punished for it (81). Other sections cover 'Loving her', 'martyrs of the heart' and 'brides of God', 'endogamy', 'an Iphigenia resignation', 'victorious and derisory love'. Luneau and Warren illuminate resistances, involving the incompatibility of human love and the venerable love of God. Although Leprohon eventually inaugurated the romance novel in Quebec, in contrast to Europe and the US, the valorization of conjugal love happened later due to the influence of Catholicism. Especially women had to make sacrifices and were responsible for preserving Catholic morality. They were kept in a golden cage. The authors guide readers through the celebration of endogamy, the condemnation of bastardy, and the importance of fidelity, which dominated Québécois romance novels from 1860 to 1920.

Initially diverted into religious or patriotic love, earthly love was subsequently relegated to the domestic sphere. 'Domesticated love' is the focus of Chapter Three. It explores 'slave/queen', 'stranger to love', 'regionalist romance novels', 'measure of feelings', 'bourgeois and maternal love', and 'the declaration of love'. After a temporary decline (1830-1880) of romance novels in France, French novelists became extraordinarily popular. Luneau and Warren discuss the revival of romance novels thanks to mass production. Although Catholic elements were retained in Québécois novels, the subversive power of love could not be tamed forever. Whilst novels during the 1920s-1930s promoted work, family, and the fatherland, during the following decade, the protagonists originated from fine, urban families, and romantic relationships served to maintain their social status. The authors elucidate the indissolubility of the Christian sacrament and the legal framework that infantilized women, additionally transforming marriage into a tomb of love (127). Mixed marriages became more absent from the literary landscape, testifying to the dread of the foreigner. Indigenous identity was only acceptable if contained within the parameters of civilization (131). The expulsion of the foreigner/stranger rendered expressions of sudden love obsolete. Overall, people married individuals from their own social milieu, because love was constrained by class and race in the Québécois novels during the interwar period. Moreover, a couple who loved each other had children. Women were child bearers and responsible for domestic chores. Men became providers.

An increased emphasis on the couple, the young, and the free infused the serialized novels during 1940s and 1950s, which are discussed in Chapter Four, titled 'celebrated love'. Divided in subsections titled 'a husband who loves me,' 'love on a dime,' 'the (relative)

triumph of flirtation', 'sensuality of dime novels,' 'between taking and being taken,' 'a man leads to a home,' 'rich and virile men,' and 'sweet happiness,' Luneau and Warren uncover the common thread in Québécois novels: love is linked to marriage, marriage to procreation, and procreation to maternal devotion, salvation of race, or to divine sacrifice, with little consideration for marital affection (212).

Chapter Five, 'serial love', is divided into 'competitors to the Quebec romance novel', 'rape sagas', 'the Harlequin explosion', 'the young adult novel', and 'sexlove'. In 1957, the Canadian Harlequin publishing house, began distributing the category 'romances' in North America. Harlequin novels moved away from the sweet romance plot towards a dialectic relationship between love and lust (241). Themes of demi-/sexuality became intimately linked to love. Decades later, the more or less veiled elements of the 'bodice ripper novel', which is characterized by carnal desires, savage passion, and violence, often set in historical/gothic settings, were introduced. The American Kathleen Woodiwiss and 'the queen of historical romance', Rosemary Rogers, are probably the most famous writers of sexually aggressive novels. Woodiwiss' *The Flame and the Flower* and Rogers' *Sweet Savage Love*, published in English in 1972 and 1974 respectively, introduced complex themes of sexual force, control, and seduction.

Some may regard 'rape sagas' as a controversial sub-genre of the historical novel. Québécois authors adapted the narrative style of novels published in English, which describe acts of male perpetrated sexual assault before the relationship between the protagonists takes on a romantic twist. Women are often degraded, because they 'ask for it'. Until challenged by the anti-rape feminist movements, e.g., grassroots anti-sexual violence movements in Canada, this entrenched societal and judicial rhetoric prevailed in the 1970s in many countries. Grounded in patriarchal norms, systems tended to excuse male violence by blaming women. Even though heroines must pay for their carnal appetites by being subjected to violent acts, in the 1970s Québécois rape sagas, the French translations/versions were toned down. Sexuality is more muted, euphemized, or romanticized than in the original English versions, Luneau and Warren write (264). Rape sagas were less successful than Harlequin romances that evoked escapist fantasies.

Almost exclusively read by women (242), the discourse of the Harlequin novel capitalized on the eternal feminine myth that woman is a woman everywhere (242), portraying a sameness regardless of ethnicity and geography. Luneau and Warren debunk this myth, pointing out that the French translations were continually modified to meet the needs of their Québécois readership. Luneau and Warren engage with the work of the Canadian Julia Benotti, who identified in *La corrida de l'amour: Le roman Harlequin*, published in 1986, that Harlequin novels follow a highly standardized narrative formula, while simultaneously incorporating numerous variations. Her critique remains a significant Canadian literary reference in the sociological study of the mass-market and the serialized romance literature.

In contrast to the North American and British American literary traditions, the Harlequin novel in French describes more elliptical and sensual scenes, evoking imagination, dreams, and utopia, while also working with the unsaid, feelings, and suggestion (243). Interestingly, the Québécois substitutes of Harlequin were unsuccessful, possibly due to specific writing codes and paratextual elements, which only appear simple (352). The authors refer to Louise Leblanc, whose parody of the Harlequin novel won the prestigious Prix Robert-Cliché (award in Quebec that celebrates first novels) in 1983. Suggesting that

everyone could write a Harlequin romance novel, her book functions as a subversive pastiche that challenges its traditional, formulaic structure.

Although love is a universal phenomenon, not all cultures love in the same way. In 'love despite everything', Chapter Six discusses 'finding one's destiny', 'homoromance', 'chick lit', 'liberated and handcuffed love', and 'dreaming of love'. The shift towards (fulfilling) sex following the cultural revolution (265) remains, at times, intimately linked to love. As such, literature for chicks first appeared in a volume on postfeminist fiction (281). Canadian versions of chick lit, a genre of popular fiction which focuses on the personal, professional, and romantic lives of modern women, frequently swaps the cosmopolitan American metropolises for local, urban centers (Toronto, Vancouver). Often featuring humorous stories that center on independent, trendy women in their twenties, who navigate their careers, friendships, and love, these novels usually revolve around women who seek happiness in the single life. Many endings nevertheless replicate the typical scenario of dreamy romance. Examples include works by Helen Fielding (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 1996), Sophie Kinsella, Laurence Weisberger, and Candace Bushnell (*Sex in the City*, 1994).

Like Harlequin novels, chick lit privileges a first-person singular narration. By the inclusion of internal monologues and diary passages, these novels create an impression of authenticity, according to Luneau and Warren (281). Even though the obsession with fashion and rampant consumerism are downplayed in the Québécois works, the romantic storyline is not sacrificed: the man is still the privileged means by which security and happiness is found (284). In Quebec, the immense interest in the chick lit genre was fueled by Rafaële Germain (280). Germain's *Soutien-Gorge Rose et Veston Noir*, published in 2004, was translated into English. Titled *Pink Bra and Black Jacket*, it appeared in 2008. Despite the awareness that the search for prince charming is no longer realistic due to high divorce rates and the feminist revolution, Luneau and Warren note that the heroine's disappointments and difficulties serve to reiterate her inability to live alone (282). Frequently, the heroine of Québécois chick lit finds her great love, according to Corinne Gervais, who examined novels written by female Québécois authors (283). Sadly, due to the portrayed male superiority and female devotion to paternalism, hierarchical gender differences become inevitable. Since the father plays a crucial role, the figure of the boyfriend often overlaps with him. Furthermore, with the quest for Mr. Right, a choice between self-love and love for the other seems unnecessary.

Although chick lit accords a central place to sexuality, the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in 2011, written by Erika Leonard under the pseudonym E.J. James, "changed everything", Luneau and Warren write (291). Since then, James' trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker*, and *Fifty Shades Freed* has sold more than 165 million copies worldwide. Her books combine BDSM with romance themes. Psychoanalytic theory suggests that traits of BDSM (bondage, discipline, domination, submission, and masochism) may be linked to sexual guilt as compensatory mechanisms for a dysfunctional superego, or that a weak superego might result in greater thrill-seeking as a compensation (see Brown et al., 2020). However, this does not explain why James' trilogy is predominantly read by women. Occasionally alluding to psychoanalytic theory (e.g., Electra Complex, repression), Luneau and Warren discuss the enigmatic popularity of this trilogy.

Many love stories are haunted by sadomasochistic tendencies, the authors suggest. They argue that Mommy Porn reactualizes the Cinderella myth and spices it up with eroticism (292). Québécois authors adopted a fairy tale genre that incorporated bodice

ripper trends. Women's sacrifice of their bodies complemented the sacrifice of their souls (293). Luneau and Warren wonder why female readers find any satisfaction at all in such novels. Their answer as to why the heroine in Marjorie Lafond's *Sous l'emprise de Monsieur Addams* (Under the Spell of Mr. Addams) agrees to bend to sadistic impulses suggests that she wants to avoid punishment. Modelled on the plot of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Bettinotti described the depiction of sexuality across the above stories in stages: meeting, polemical confrontation, seduction, revelation of love, and union (300). In the Québécois version, the classic scenario of polemical confrontation constitutes a variation on the victim novel that is expressed in sadomasochism. Whilst French-Canadian society, like other societies, initially repressed love (309), this repression has lifted and turned into perversity. The authors show that romance novels lend themselves to historical analyses of how societies deal with impulses of love.

Power imbalances between the female and male characters have not subsided, they only masquerade under headings, such as 'liberated love.' Females are no longer financially at the mercy of male characters, they do not have to rush to the altar, they can file for divorce, live alone, initiate sex, focus on their careers, and live satisfying lives, as the chick lit novels demonstrate. Despite postwar autonomy and the feminist critique of machismo, which distinguished the Québécois novels from traditional Harlequin works due to their focus on Québécois reality, instead of reproducing the clichés of the dominating man and the passive, objectified woman (316), and the almost complete disappearance of sacrifice in chick lit (317), the money that women spent on plastic surgery and cosmetics, and the development of sexbots, makes me wonder whether the intimate, love connection has got lost in the inhibited "game" of sex (319) in hypersexualized societies. Luneau and Warren would argue otherwise. Despite a decline in the written romance novels due to film and photo novels, Luneau and Warren suggest that the Québécois readers still "devour" romance novels in the 21st century by authors such as Marc Lévy, Guillaume Musso, Diana Gabaldon, and Danielle Steel (302). Although the Québécois book market is dominated by foreign authors, Luneau and Warren point out that sex cannot replace love altogether. Love is prevented from dying, in spite of fears that love progressively fades with the mundane things that form part of the couple's life (304).

Love Stories Now and Then is an extraordinary book. Nevertheless, it would have benefitted from an index and a table, listing all the included works. This does not detract from its value, and I recommend this book wholeheartedly. In addition to listing emblematic works and, thereby, contributing to new knowledge, the French-Canadian romance novel has often been "scorned by cultural gatekeepers" (9). By introducing unknown or forgotten francophone works whose value had been denied, the authors contribute to making the anglophone romance literature less dominant. Knowledge of both traditions (francophone and anglophone) deepens our understanding of the historical development of the romance genre. At the same time, the authors' historical lens uncovers the ills of society and socio-political injustices.

This scholarly book is beautifully written. Through the inclusion of numerous excerpts, the analyses become alive. Comparisons of sexuality and love in French and English narratives are equally enlightening. By viewing the history of love through the lens of romance novels, the authors offer an original perspective on the codification of feelings. Discussions allow insight into French Canadians' attitudes towards love and how these changed over the past two centuries. They reveal how class, national identity, religion, and

race influenced people's choice of partners. Of interest is also that love stories were continually reinvented, which resulted in diverse content. Despite its fixed structure, the romance novel remains a reservoir of fantasies and regulations (307). Québécois novels celebrate the meeting of two human beings who find the mysterious reason for their happiness in their uniqueness (308). That cultures codify manifestations of love, and how words used to speak of love reflect socio-cultural norms, is also interesting from a sociological perspective. Sadly, societies channel, sublimate, censor, and repress the stirrings of the heart.

Québécois romance novels were widely read by all social classes but more by females. Why and how did males avoid the "triumph of love" (27), when love was the cardinal virtue that governed people's actions and gave meaning to their lives? This question is not answered. What is noteworthy instead is that the novels and their readers exhibit a stereotypical gender difference that is hard to eradicate: the romantic female victims versus the sexually violent male. At times, the descriptions of violence in chapters five to six are disturbing. Racism, sexism, and the alleged female inferiority that echo through the analyzed literature make for an uncomfortable read. But characteristics of Québécois and international romance novels are not limitations of the current book. However, Luneau and Warren acknowledge that their catalogue of works is not exhaustive. Partly because many works before the Second World War were not preserved. Partly due to the vast number of titles that appeared when mass production enabled the distribution of inexpensive formats (paperback, dime novel). So, the authors had to be selective. Inevitably, this introduces bias. But would the inclusion of more titles have changed the conclusions that can be drawn from analyses of Québécois romance novels? I do not think so. After all, the romance novel adheres to similar structures. Whilst love is socially constructed in novels, ultimately, love is all that matters, even if the triumph of love is never guaranteed.

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