

In defence of reading trash

In *Cultural Populism*, McGuigan argues that in British cultural studies 'there is populist sentiment, but hardly any 'sentimentality' is discernible' (McGuigan, p. 13). I want to argue that there was then, and there remains, an arena of British cultural studies that has always been concerned with 'sentimentality' – and that is the romance narrative. McGuigan does later acknowledge in a footnote that 'The study of women's reading of romance fiction has been one of the most fiercely debated and productive topics in feminist cultural studies (McGuigan, p.168), but that is where he leaves romance fiction, as a footnote. The study of the romance genre was and still is a particularly female field, men on the whole do not read, nor do they write (as far as can be known) popular sentimental fictions – and very few have analysed them. Claud Cockburn recognized in 1972 that the romance novel inevitably addresses gender politics and the 'woman question':

The bestsellers are, of course, rich sources of information regarding what may be called, for very rough convenience, the 'private sector' of life and love, notably love, and spilling over from there to cover the general status of women. (Cockburn, 1972, p. 14)

The popular novel is an arena in which gender politics is high on the agenda, and it is a largely female critical space. I was lucky enough to have come of academic age at a moment at which feminists including Tania Modleski, Angela McRobbie, Jean Radford, Ros Coward and others had already established a critical voice in the analysis of popular forms for women.

Nonetheless, when I first began giving papers at conferences on romance fiction I would preface every paper with an apologia, citing the sheer numbers of generic romance novels that are sold, in a bid to establish that popular fictions, and especially popular fiction for women, should be taken seriously. My then Head of Department sympathetically looked at my publications and murmured – well, of course, you can't go on writing about this stuff . . .'. McGuigan suggested in 1992 that: 'No longer is it thought illegitimate to study . . . Hollywood films or romance fiction' (McGuigan, p. 3), but in many English Literature departments it does remain 'illegitimate'.

The recent media furore surrounding the student demands at Cambridge to widen the literature curriculum suggest that there are powerful forces still in place who would prefer that Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis should remain as the cultural arbiters of what qualifies as 'Literature'. Two years after the publication of *Cultural Politics*, in 1994, Harold Bloom wrote a diatribe of absolute certainty against cultural populism; for him the 'Western Canon' is defined by 'those authors who are authoritative in our culture' (Bloom, p. 1). Bloom is a hard line version of Matthew Arnold – he goes beyond Arnold's definition of culture as 'the best that has been thought

or known in the world' –he represents a late twentieth century reinscription of what McGuigan terms 'English literary criticism's petit bourgeois 'discrimination' strategy. (McGuigan, p. 46)

Only four women writers make it into the definitive twenty-six of Bloom's 'Western Canon' and of those six it is only the American Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf who merit their own chapters. Bloom has no time for the 'popular' in any shape or form. He decries 'current squalors' (Bloom, p. 1) and denounces 'the academic-journalistic network I have dubbed the School of Resentment who wish to overthrow the Canon in order to advance their supposed (and non-existent) programs for social change . . . (Bloom, p. 4). The 'patronisingly hierarchical conception of culture conception of culture descended from the apex of individual cultivation' that McGuigan ascribes to T.S. Eliot (p. 21) is alive and well in academic literature departments. For every attempt to 'decolonialize' the canon there are those who, brandishing Harold Bloom, are more concerned with the 'survival possibilities' of the Western Canon. (Bloom, p. 4)

I am proud to be a member of what Bloom terms 'The School of Resentment': Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, Semioticians' (Bloom, p. 527); if I cannot be defined by all those terms, it is nonetheless the case that I have employed most, if not all of those methodologies in my reading of popular fiction. It is not only male Professors of a certain age who deride the 'squalor' (Bloom's term) of popular genres. Fay Weldon, a writer who is well versed in popular forms, warned her fictional niece Alice to beware of 'Romance Alley', 'the hyped twin houses of *Scruples* and *Lace*' (Weldon was writing in 1984) sternly advising that blockbuster novels are 'calculated to divert and impress and often do – but do not take them seriously, Alice, and know them for what they are'. (Weldon, p. 17)

It is possible both to know these texts for 'what they are' – and to take them seriously. The popular novel may not be a barometer of social history, and it is never a simple reflection of its times, but what it can do is to chart the limits and shifts in social discourse, and so offer insights into what can and cannot be spoken and publicly acknowledged. John Sutherland has argued that what is significant about best-selling novels is 'what they tell us about the book trade, the market place, the reading public and society generally at the time they have done well' (Sutherland, 1981, p. 5).

The sub-genres of the domestic romance are defined by their historical context, and often themselves contribute towards a definition of a decade, as in the sex and shopping novels which embodied the consumerism of the 1980s, Bridget Jones who personified the anxious young professional woman of the 1990s, or the 'yummy mummy' novels which prefigured the 2017

television series *Motherland* by a decade. When a number of writers who achieve popular status and a wide readership are preoccupied with a shared narrative, then this is a signal that something important is being addressed. Popular fictions written by women tend to cluster around the dominant discourses of femininity in any given period, either to challenge or embrace that hegemony. And they can often challenge received wisdoms, to read across the output of Mills & Boon from 1945 to 1960 is to be confronted with narratives in which their heroines were by no means content to return to the domestic sphere, and that women's aspirations in the post-war period prioritised meaningful employment over true romance.

Women writers across the hierarchy of genres can often be seen to concern themselves with very similar issues, and can often come to very similar conclusions; in the 1950s, both Iris Murdoch and Barbara Cartland were concerned with the impact of the war on contemporary masculinity. In the 1970s, Alice Walker and Andrea Newman (in *Bouquet of Barbed Wire*) addressed the impact of university on young women. Because popular fiction is generally not taken seriously by critics, these novels can express commonly experienced doubts and anxieties that cannot be admitted in any other context. These texts offer an articulation of anxieties about what it means to be a woman, the desires and contradictions of the feminine, that are inadmissible elsewhere. The novel can confront these tensions in a way that cannot be found in other forms of popular culture, even those with a predominantly female readership or audience. Women's magazines present aspirational lifestyle fantasies, while soap operas are concerned with stories of communities rather than those of individual women. The novel is a fictional form that unapologetically presents an entirely subjective point of view. The narrative voice in these novels is, almost without exception, intensely personal. The narrator, whether first or third person, frequently assumes a tone of intimacy with the reader, often addressing the reader directly; a strategy that is employed by women writers as far apart stylistically and historically as Monica Dickens, Alice Walker, Fay Weldon and Helen Fielding.

To trace the tropes and contradictions in popular fiction, to identify a discourse across a genre (or even to identify a genre) is not necessarily to celebrate these texts as aesthetically important but rather a strategy - to identify what their shared preoccupations are. The derogatory terms 'chick-lit' and 'yummy mummy' refer to genres that emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and both reveal very real anxieties about parenting, consumption and female identity in the neo-liberal context of the early years of the new millennium,. Reading the genre of the single woman narrative across a set of texts, from *Sex in the City* to *Bridget Jones's Diary*, demonstrates that while their heroines embrace shopping, consumption is in these novels by no means the liberating force for self-invention that some cultural critics have claimed. Rob Shields, Meghan Morris, Lauren

Langman, (who could be read as 'consumptionist populists', in Mcguigan's term), have all suggested that consumption can be a means for the production of identity. However, far from unproblematically celebrating the liberating possibilities of consumption, these fictions demonstrate an intense anxiety about the shame of getting consumer choices wrong. The yummy mummy novel, from *I Don't Know How She does it* to *Having It All*, similarly demonstrates that consumption is no answer to the trials and tribulations involved in juggling work and childcare. These are novels that challenge the glib narratives of women entrepreneurs such as Sheryl Sandberg, who advised her readers to 'Lean In' in 2013. If these novels cannot bring themselves to acknowledge that there is a systemic inequality, they nonetheless do expose the very real pressures that working mothers face in the Brave New World of employment. Literary genres are not a fixed category, there are residual and dominant forms of popular fiction, which respond to changing social and historical conditions, and which are ripe for reinterpretation. As Felski has argued:

. . . women's use of supposedly 'outdated' forms such as the autobiography or the *Bildungsroman* cannot simply be interpreted as anachronistic or regressive; the important and wide-spread re-appropriation and reworking of such textual models indicates that the project of modernity is indeed unfinished history, that concerns with subjectivity and self-emancipation encoded within such narrative structures possess a continuing and often urgent relevance for oppressed social groups. (Felski, p. 169)

These are popular fictions, and they do tend to offer neat ideological resolutions, but what should not be underestimated is that they represent a space in which those anxieties and experiences can be articulated. And their resolutions are not necessarily ideologically comfortable; the current most successful publishing genre for women readers is 'domestic noir'. Texts such as *Gone Girl* and *Girl on a Train*, whose popular success has produced a chain of imitators, demonstrate that many contemporary women writers have deep and violent concerns about the current state of relationships between men and women.

These discourses surrounding anxiety and the contemporary demands of femininity are not restricted to Western generic fiction. India has a thriving publishing and film industry, and its own versions of fictions concerned with young professional women, which again are deeply ambivalent about contemporary shifts in the Indian economy and culture. There is a whole genre concerning young women negotiating the complexities of a new economically liberal India, which replicate to a marked extent the anxieties of the Western 'chick-lit novel'. The confessional and intimate voice of *Bridget Jones' Diary* is there too in the often first person narratives of the Indian versions of the

single woman novel, a sharing of the conflicts between family and tradition and the possibilities now available to young Indian women.

Many of those texts are not published in Britain, although they are largely written in English. These are novels for which the question of aesthetic value is not appropriate, they are written in a second language, to reach the widest readership among the great range of Indian dialects and languages, and can often be very awkwardly expressed. They are nonetheless very widely read and they offer their readership a set of aspirational narratives that frame the contemporary experience of 'Young India', to borrow a term from Chetan Bhagat, India's most popular novelist by a long way, but one who is absent from Western discussions of Indian fiction. At a recent post-colonial conference I heard a number of papers which cited Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh among others, many of which argued that the contemporary Indian novel presented a challenge to the neoliberal economics and values of Western capitalism. That may be the case with these writers, but it is not true of many popular novelists currently writing in India. No-one at the conference had heard of, let alone read Bhagat, India's best selling writer, whose novels and essays celebrate a new India of cut throat competition and self promotion. To date, Bhagat's novels have sold over seven million copies; in 2008, the *New York Times* cited Bhagat as 'the biggest selling English language novelist in India's history' and six of his novels have been turned into blockbuster films. In a 2012 collection of essays 'What Young India Wants' Bhagat exhorted his readership to ambition: 'We need to get rich, and fast . . .' (Bhagat, p.129). For Bhagat, 'Young India' should be asserting itself as aspirational and entrepreneurial, he urges the generation who grew up in the wake of India's second-generation economic reforms to embrace globalization and the American way of getting rich.

A post-colonial analysis that is framed only by those literary novels that make their way to a Western readership can only be a partial understanding. It is important to recognise that the way in which the New India is experienced by millions of readers is rather different from the India of the literary novel; it is difficult to make claims for Indian fiction without at least some knowledge of these other, widely read voices.

This is a political moment when populism is on the rise internationally, a moment when the apparent president of the United States came to public prominence through a reality television programme. Populism offers apparently simple answers that seem reassuring at a time of anxiety in the face of globalisation, neo-liberalism and the widening gulf in national and global inequality. It is important to understand what those reassuring narratives are, and why they might be attractive.

Harold Bloom suggests that 'students of literature have become amateur political scientists, uniformed sociologists, incompetent anthropologists, mediocre philosophers, and overdetermined cultural historians . . . They resent literature, or are ashamed of it, or are just not all that fond of it' (Bloom, p. 521). I may be an uninformed sociologist, and a mediocre philosopher, and, as a Professor of Cultural History, I am certainly an overdetermined cultural historian, but I do resent the attribution that I resent, or am just not all that fond, of literature. I take pleasure in reading both Proust and Henry James and pulp fiction, and I have the book shelves to prove it.

To pay serious attention to popular forms is not necessarily to celebrate them or to, as McGuigan suggests, witheringly, to 'affect a disingenuous solidarity with ordinary people and their preferences' (McGuigan, p. 77). While, as Weldon advocated, 'knowing popular fictions' for what they are' is a necessary strategy, it is important to ignore her advice and to take them seriously. These texts articulate significant discourses, they make widespread anxieties and aspirations visible, and cultural critics need to pay close attention to what they have to tell us. As Richard Dyer argued in 1992:

. . . we might be well advised to listen, really listen, to the discourse of entertainment itself' (Dyer, 1992, p. 7)

Notes

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