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Valerie Weaver-Zercher. *Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013.

The Amish make up less than one-tenth of one percent of the population of the United States, yet in 2012 a new “Amish romance novel” was published every four days and a new Amish book series was launched every two weeks. Sales figures of Amish novels by authors like Beverly Lewis, Wanda Brunstetter, and Cindy Woodsmall—none of them Amish themselves—can run into the millions. Valerie Weaver-Zercher’s timely and engaging study, *Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels*, is the first extended study of this remarkable literary phenomenon.

In the opening chapter, Weaver-Zercher draws on cultural studies and transactional reader theories to argue that in order to understand the “allure” of Amish fiction, we need to attend not simply to the novels themselves but also to their production, circulation, and—most important in this context—their reception. The second chapter offers a brief survey of the field, distinguishing Amish fiction from prairie and Harlequin romances, identifying Helen Reimensnyder Martin’s *Sabrina* (1905) as the original and “ur-bonnet book,” and noting a few other early precedents before positioning Beverly Lewis as the direct forerunner of the contemporary publishing boom.

What follows throughout the remaining eight chapters, in discussions with titles like “The DNA of Amish Romance Novels,” “Taking the Amish to Market,” and “Amish Reading Amish,” is a sharp and engaging examination that aims to take seriously the various competing interests driving the growth of the field.

Weaver-Zercher argues that the source of the “thrill” behind Amish romance novels is complex and conflicted, and suggests that their popularity may tell us more about their readers than about the Amish. Rather than offering close engagements with individual novels, she dips strategically into the books and a large pool of interviews with readers, authors, and publishers. Although at times this approach risks being too anecdotal to support her broad claims, it does offer a fascinating portrait of the phenomenon as a whole, enabling her to identify its overemphasis of certain aspects of Amish culture (e.g., shunning) and a concomitant dismissal or ignoring of other aspects (e.g., pacifism).

Weaver-Zercher suggests that the initial draw of such novels is that they offer “clean” entertainment, reflecting a widespread dissatisfaction with “hypermodernity” and “hypersexualization,” which she presents as two overlapping dynamics of contemporary American life to which the Amish—or at least the Amish as they are portrayed in these novels—have come to represent a welcome antithesis. At the same time, she points out that the novels can be understood as affirming their evangelical readers’ own experiences and faith trajectories, with plucky but ultimately righteous protagonists wrestling with doubts and restrictive authority figures before blooming into a more individualized—i.e., more evangelical—faith.

*The Thrill of the Chaste* is an eminently readable book. Although I would have liked to see Weaver-Zercher engage some of the critical discussions that surround the concerns of the study more deeply, her ability to offer a nuanced argument without slipping into academic jargon will surely be appreciated by the large non-academic audience likely to be interested in the study. Moreover, she refuses to trivialize the books themselves or to caricature their mainly female evangelical readers. Convincingly arguing that such dismissals often reflect questionable assumptions about what counts as “serious” literature and who (or what gender) its readers ought to be, she goes on to show how many of the concerns over the predictability or quality of religious fiction are assuaged by an understanding of the role of literary conventions in genre fiction, and of the function of faith-based reading more generally.

Near the end of the study, Weaver-Zercher recounts a dinner at which a family friend of hers responds to her project—a book about the people who read books about another group of people—with some bemusement. “Did I now expect someone else to write a book about the book that I was writing about the books that have been written about the Amish?” she asks herself. The question is positioned as rhetorical, but there is no need to be skeptical about the study’s future. This is a welcome text for a number of fields; we will, indeed, be writing about it for some time.

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