

Film and Book Reviews

Love Between the Covers (film). Dir. by Laurie Kahn. Prod. by Laurie Kahn. Blueberry Hill Productions, 2015. 95 mins. \$12.99, available on Amazon and iTunes.

Love Between the Covers examines the industry and culture of romance literature by focusing on the women who live and work in the multibillion-dollar behemoth of the publishing world. Director Laurie Kahn, whose previous documentary *Tupperware!* told the story of housewives disrupting home markets by selling innovative products in innovative ways, once again dissects the democratization of American commerce by discussing products made by and for women. By focusing on these personal and professional stories, Kahn makes a strong case for the importance of romance novels in the studies of gender, literature, and business.

The film begins by explaining that this is a story about “pride and prejudice,” about professional and powerful women whose full-time jobs are as surgeons or professors, or prolific novelists or aspiring writers or author’s assistants. All of these women come together at the Romance Writers of America National Convention, a convocation of diverse women who share a common passion for sex, love, and H.E.A.s (Happily Ever Afters). Kahn’s most apparent thesis is that this industry and these women should be taken seriously. By comparing the works of Austen, Shakespeare, Hemmingway, and Hawthorne to those of modern romance writers, Kahn remarks on the respective parallels of domesticated romance, the differences between tragedy and romance and between realism and formula, and the inherent sexism of puritan culture that lingers in literary snobs’ refusal to legitimize an industry of women writers.

The bulk of the film follows the lives of several women in different stages of their literary careers. Kahn first introduces author Mary Bly—the daughter of writers—who is a professor of English Literature who began writing under the pen name Eloisa James for fear she would not receive tenure if her department knew of her side job. She represents the bridge between academic and popular fiction, teaching Shakespeare by day and writing Regency romance by night. Bly makes the case for a populist approach to fiction, contending that

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all genres should be treated equally because all can successfully describe the human condition or evoke human emotion. Indeed, it is in mass-produced romance paperbacks where female sexuality, which is often absent or exploited in other mainstream cultural outputs, is treated most accurately, most positively. Romance literature is so popular and its readers so voracious because it fills a market demand for women looking for both representation and fantasy.

Another highlight of the film is the story of Beverly Jenkins, who was looking for such representation when she began writing novels featuring female African American protagonists. Jenkins presents a hopeful fiction to her readers, admitting that in popular culture, "We've never had anyone who thought we were beautiful." Similarly, Celeste Bradley and Susan Donovan, novelists and writing partners, tell their own hopeful stories of personal and professional difficulties in breaking away from unsupportive spouses and into a competitive yet compassionate industry.

Perhaps most striking is the collaboration within the community. Kahn paints the industry as a meritocracy and as increasingly democratized in both production and content. The conflation of reader and writer has led to significant Internet and fan engagement, exemplified by prodigious author's assistant Kim Castillo, as well as the early adoption of e-books and expansive self-publishing. Joanne Lockyer, for example, a young aspiring writer, wrote a novel, produced her own photo shoot for the front cover, and self-published the finished product. Len Barot (pen name Radclyffe) founded Bold Strokes Books to support authors writing gay and lesbian fiction. The end result is an impressive number of writers and an even larger volume of books. The ubiquity of romance novels is readily apparent to the lay reader who has ever strolled the romance section of a bookstore or who has a mother, grandmother, sister, wife, or daughter who reads a book of this genre each week.

The film is engaging, and Kahn's direction is neither revelatory nor stale. Her use of talking heads is personal, and she does a fine job presenting the community as positive, inclusive, and collaborative. The portrayal of the publishing houses and market structure is a little muddled, with Harlequin and HarperCollins representing both the backbone and antiquated big business side of production, but the film recognizes romance publishing is changing rapidly. Most notably, *Love Between the Covers* shines a worthy spotlight on an industry that is often and too easily dismissed as superfluous. Kahn offers a well-supported argument that romance fiction is essential to the publishing industry's bottom line and to the democratization of women writers and female sexuality. As such, it is a film that would appeal to romance fans and business historians, as well as students of gender studies and literature.

True to the direct engagement inherent in romance literature, there is a wealth of information on the film's website (www.lovebetweenthecovers.com), including a resource guide compiled by Eric Selinger of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance. The film is available to stream on both Amazon and iTunes.

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Mukesh Eswaran. *Why Gender Matters in Economics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014. 408 pp. ISBN 9780691121734, \$45.00 (cloth).

"A text is like medicine," the art critic Pauline Kael complained in the mid-1990s. "[I]t's a book you don't want to read that is supposed to be good for you."¹ Begrudgingly, she made an exception for texts in more technical fields, such as economics, where material can be reduced and codified, where tastes can be assumed, where standards of excellence and significance can be enforced by institutional authority.

Mukesh Eswaran's *Why Gender Matters in Economics* is an oddity. Designed for a course on Women in the Economy, the text artfully demonstrates how economic thinking adds value to debates about sex and gender and how considerations of women have forced a reconsideration of the "science" of economics. In light of recent student-led demands for more diversity in the teaching of economics, it stands as a considerable achievement. Had the text offered a more playful alternative to the prosaic thought exercises and discussion questions that end the chapters, even the cranky Kael might have drunk the medicine and found it good for her.

The text promises a "comprehensive view of the economic lives of women" (ix). Building on the contributions of a long list of pioneering women economists—Esther Boserup, Joyce P. Jacobsen, Francine D. Blau, Nancy Folbre, Claudia Goldin, Marianne Ferber, and Anne E. Winkler, among others—it extends the analytical, topical, and geographical reach of women's economic activities beyond labor markets to "sites of struggle" that produce different outcomes for women and men and occasionally different gendered behaviors in rich and poor

1. Kael, Pauline. "It's Only a Movie." *Performing Arts Journal* 17, no. 2/3 (May–Sept 1995): 14.