

Valerie Weaver-Zercher, *Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. Pp. xx+315. Softcover, \$24.95 U.S.

Recently, the mainstream media has been inundated with new television shows that explore “Amishness”: TLC’s “Breaking Amish” is a reality show that follows coming-of-age Amish as they leave their communities behind to explore the modern world; HBO’s “Banshee” is set in Pennsylvania’s Amish country, where the peaceful countryside sits in contrast to the sex and violence that characterize the rural community’s dark underside; The Discovery Channel is home to “Amish Mafia”; even the DIY Channel has gotten in on the action with “Vanilla Ice Goes Amish.” The Amish are, curiously, one of the hottest things going these days.

Valerie Weaver-Zercher’s *Thrill of the Chaste* looks specifically at Amish romance novels and explores why *they* are such a hot commodity of the contemporary book market. She traces the history of these novels and their recent rise in popularity. She then explores what these books accomplish; that is, Weaver-Zercher looks at how they are used as devotional guides for evangelical Christians, how they inform notions of “godly womanhood,” and how they speak to and cultivate nostalgia for the “plainness” of the past. Weaver-Zercher’s study examines how the Amish themselves read these romances, and it argues that in some ways, these romances may be transformative for a young female Amish reader: the heroines function as surrogates who can live out fantasies of desire unavailable to those within the community. How these heroines experience the modern world and isolation from family can be instructive, inspirational, or cautionary. Her penultimate chapter interrogates what effect Amish romance novels might have on the average middle-American reader. Through the lens of post-colonial theories of “the other” – exoticism and domestication – she explores how the “Englische” appropriate “Amishness” and, conversely, how modern society itself is “othered” by the Amish-centric perspective of some novels. “By entering an Amish world,” she writes, “readers may begin to see themselves and their world of origin through the eyes of the Amish, and taken-for-granted customs of hypermodern life may become suddenly contingent and unstable” (241).

Weaver-Zercher’s notion of “hyper-modern” and “hyper-sexualized” life, however, needs to be worried more than it is in this text. Frequently her study is conscientiously self-reflective; she interrogates throughout the longing for plainness and purity that Amish romance novels exploit, yet seldom is there anything but a faint nod to the nuances of modern life itself. Weaver-Zercher’s study upholds the

same dichotomy that Amish novels themselves delineate for their protagonists and their readership: “the hungers of the flesh and the attainments of the spirit” (159). The book takes for granted the “excessively modern and immoderately sexualized” (233) character of modern culture. This allows, on the one hand, Weaver-Zercher to enter into the frame of reference of Amish romance readers, primarily evangelical Christians who long for “clean” narratives that are devotionally inspiring and morally instructive. On the other hand, Weaver-Zercher’s book risks reinforcing the ideology it proposes to critically examine: that of a “chaste fiction” which operates counter-culturally. In other words, by taking the yearning to escape from modern life and modern culture as a starting point, Weaver-Zercher’s study suggests that to a large readership, Amish romance does not present an alternative to modern life, but rather reinforces normative values that continue to characterize the twenty-first century.

Weaver-Zercher’s methodical approach is “narrative scholarship,” an “amalgam of story and academic writing” (xiii). Although a careful analysis of the Amish novels themselves is, largely, absent from this study, Weaver-Zercher’s writing is supremely readable and academically informed: scholarship mingles with anecdote, which makes this a type of “armchair study.” Even if one has little interest in the subject matter or experience reading academic writing, this book is unfailingly engaging.

Weaver-Zercher makes a compelling case for the cultural significance of Amish romance novels and for their enduring popularity.

Marilyn Simon  
University of Toronto

Carrie Snyder, *The Juliet Stories*. Toronto: Anansi, 2012. Pp 324. Softcover, \$22.95.

Like most coming-of-age narratives, *The Juliet Stories* is bittersweet. Leaving the garden of innocence always entails some loss along with the acquisition of forbidden knowledge. In this version of the ancient myth, however, the “garden” is no idyllic world but Nicaragua of the 1980s, in the midst of civil strife. Although the protagonist Juliet, only ten years old upon arrival, sees more horror and faces more danger in her year and a half there than during her previous life in Indiana and the rest of her life in Canada, Nicaragua ever after remains her Shangri-La, a place that offered her astonishing freedom, beauty such as she had