

Crane, Ralph and Lisa Fletcher. *Island Genres, Genre Islands: Conceptualisation and Representation in Popular Fiction*. Pp. xix, 202. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. US \$34.95 (paper). ISBN: 9781783482061.

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Like a cruise liner, Crane and Fletcher's *Island Genres, Genre Islands* takes its readers on a journey around various genre islands, making brief stops at selected ports. While the cruise experience would be enriched by disembarking from the ship and spending more time onshore at crime atoll, thriller island, the isle of popular romance, and the archipelago of fantasy, or by having visited them previously, the on-board lecture programme ensures that all travellers will return home feeling more knowledgeable about the differences between them and convinced that "[p]opular fiction offers [...] a potent site for identifying and unpacking habits of thinking about distinctive natural environments" (xi).

The book's series of on-board lectures is divided into four sections of roughly 40 pages, including notes, for each of the genres visited. Each section comprises a broad, introductory "opening survey chapter that addresses how islands signify and function in a particular genre, and two further chapters that offer detailed case studies of the conceptualisation and representation of islands in seminal or otherwise significant texts" (xvi-xvii).

The opening lecture is similar to that of a Destination Speaker or cruise ship's on-board lecturer, giving a broad overview of the many different novels within a genre which are set on islands and demonstrating how these islands are "genre-inflected: for example, a romance island is at once similar to and different from an island in a crime or fantasy novel" (xv). A crime island, for instance, could be considered the equivalent of the "device of the locked room that proved so enduring in the golden age" (9) since,

as in earlier clue-puzzle mysteries, there is the sense that the murderer is in one's midst, and the fear is thus heightened for characters and readers alike. The island, frequently regarded prior to the crime as a stable, hospitable environment, is transformed during the period of the investigation into an unstable, inhospitable one – a sinister environment under threat from a murderer, who, of course, is more often than not a local. (9)

Thrillers, in which islands often “represent a confined territory in which, or over which, two rivals (nations, agencies, individuals) compete, like boxers in a ring, repeatedly coming out of and retreating into their respective corners as the novel progresses” (52), are also often “equally invested in the mobilities that connect islands: to each other and to continental landmasses” (53). The “literary cartography” of the fantasy archipelago insists that “no island is ‘entire of itself’” while the island of romance is a “home, sanctuary, refuge, and paradise – ideal [...] for the happy-ever-after ending” (xvii).

The subsequent chapters in a section are more akin to the lectures given by a Port and Shopping Lecturer inasmuch as they focus on a particular port and highlight issues and attractions specific to it. The first such chapter concentrates on “Agatha Christie’s Islands” (19) while the next deals with G. W. Kent’s Solomon Islands series and draws attention to the fact that in them “the combination of [...] native policeman and white sidekick [...] invites questions about the nature of colonialism and the position of the expatriate community in a group of islands moving inexorably towards independence” (33). The thriller islands on the itinerary are Ian Fleming’s “Bond Islands” (57), in which “the islands of the West Indies consistently function [...] as ‘contact zones’ where the battles for global supremacy take place against the backdrop of a fading Empire” (60) and the islands in three of Clive Cussler’s Dirk Pitt novels. The book concludes with chapters on Ursula K. Le Guin’s Earthsea and Robin Hobb’s Liveship Traders trilogy, “which invites consideration as an eco-fantasy” (169) and “asks us to appreciate islands in the context of a water world” (173).

The romance islands are the imaginary Three Sisters Island in a series by Nora Roberts and the Isle of Man in Margaret Evan Porter’s The Islanders series. Evan Porter’s

series, first published as mass market paperbacks by Avon Books (1998-2000), was re-released by the author in significantly revised e-book editions in 2012. The new covers are the first indication that Porter’s revisions amplify the import of the Isle of Man. [...] While close comparison of the first and revised editions is not our objective [...] it is nevertheless worth noting that some of the textual changes enhance the focus on Manx geography, history, and folklore, and intensify the use of island metaphors for characterisation and plot development. (104-5)

This use of island metaphors, as in *The Seducer* in which each of the protagonists “imagine[s] the other as the Isle of Man personified” (112), points to the way in which, “[i]n contrast to crime fiction (except in the hybrid genre of romantic suspense) and the thriller, the romance island is almost always a device for at least one key character to achieve a sense of identity, typically by discovering an affinity with the geography and/or the community of the island” (110). For the protagonists of Nora Roberts’ Three Sisters Island trilogy, which is the subject of the third and final chapter on romance,

the island space affords them the outer perimeter of their social space. [...] The paranormal plot augments this sense of the containment by a band or barrier as the witches are able to *feel* when one of their number arrives on or leaves the island. [...] The utopian promise of Three Sisters Island, both within the narrative and in its address to readers, is based on a presumption of insularity as the basis for enhanced sociality. (121-22)

This is, therefore, an example of a set of texts in which “‘island’ is a synonym for ‘home,’ an idealised locale where one feels both safe and free” (123).

The advantage of a cruise of the kind offered by *Island Genres, Genre Islands* is that it ensures the reader is carried safely from one genre to another, facilitating comparisons between them. Readers are not assumed to have detailed knowledge of every novel mentioned and short plot outlines are therefore often offered. The disadvantage of such a cruise is that the traveller has a rather limited amount of time to spend on each genre and even less at each of the highlighted attractions. The claims made about the differing functions of islands were thought-provoking; unfortunately since they were numerous, each one could not be explored in depth. In romance, for instance, it is suggested that:

- islands often make visible a sense of “emotional isolation” (88);
- since “[t]he many subgenres of romance are unified by their commitment to the romantic ‘journey’ and its felicitous destination” (90), “a close correspondence” may be anticipated between a protagonist’s “geographical and emotional destinations” (90);
- the restricted space on an island enhances “opportunities for intimacy and opposition” (91);
- “next to ‘love,’ ‘home’ is the key concept of island romance” (93);
- “Island geographies are routinely deployed in romance as ciphers for both the characters’ desire to escape the mundaneness of everyday life and their yearning for the safety and comfort of home” (93);
- and the “relative ‘unreality’ of island geographies enables the truncated courtships of many island romances as readers are invited to accept the guiding assumption that life proceeds differently on an island or, in simpler terms, that fantasies which are impossible in the ‘real world’ can come true there.” (96)

In addition, the “cluster of meanings attached to islands” (98) in novels which might be termed “romantic mysteries” (97) merges “the genre conventions of crime, horror, and romance” (98).

Even in the chapters devoted to a group of texts by a single author I had the sensation of being rushed through the arguments. For example, in the chapter about Nora Roberts’s Three Sisters Island series, it is asserted that one heroine’s wish to belong on the island

casts her as a surrogate romance reader within the text: her wish to join the island’s community mirrors the genre expectations of experienced romance readers that are heightened by this opening chapter. The alignment of Nell [...] with the novel’s implied readers is strengthened later in the chapter when she finds a warm welcome and her dream job at the local bookstore. (125)

Other than by placing her in close proximity to books, it is not made clear how Nell’s job (which involves cooking for the shop’s café) aligns her with readers of the novel and, other than a quote from one reader, who stated on Goodreads that she wished the island “was a

real place and I could go there” (119), there is no evidence provided about the expectations or wishes of romance readers (experienced or otherwise).

In the context of island studies, *Island Genres, Genre Islands*’ “aim is not to deny or discount the meanings produced through direct engagement with islands but rather to show that the conceptualisations and representations of islands do not need to be restricted to ‘real islands’” (106-7). For those studying or teaching popular culture, the book provides an unusual entry-point from which to think about the differences and similarities between different genres. In crime fiction, for example, the “device of using a violent storm to isolate the island” may be used to ensure that suspects cannot escape, but that same device is likely to perform a rather different function in another genre: it is “employed frequently, for example, in romance fiction where the island storm forces the principal characters to stay together, and in fantasy fiction where island storms frequently signify the presence of magic” (24).

Among those of us with a particular interest in romance, the book should prompt increased interest in the places in which romance novels are set. Crane and Fletcher observe that “[s]cholars of popular romance fiction have largely ignored the significance of setting” (114) and state that “setting matters more than romance scholars have hitherto realised” (129). It is true that research in this area of romance scholarship more closely resembles a still-emergent, volcanically-produced archipelago, than a continent. Crane and Fletcher draw on some of the texts which have already emerged from beneath the waves: Lynne Pearce’s work on the locations of popular romance fiction, an article by William Gleason on “Jennifer Crusie and the Architecture of Love” (in a volume edited by Fletcher), and Britta Hartmann’s thesis, which Fletcher and Crane supervised.

There are, however, other works which discuss the settings of romance, albeit in passing or in a single chapter, including Rachel Anderson’s early study of romantic fiction which included a chapter on “The Lure of the Desert”; Amy Burge has recently followed in her footsteps by analysing the locations of both medieval and modern romances set in the East. George Paizis’s *Love and the Novel: The Poetics and Politics of Romantic Fiction* includes a section on localisation, Jay Dixon’s *The Romance Fiction of Mills & Boon, 1909-1990s* very briefly draws attention to the connotations of town and country settings, and Juliet Flesch’s *From Australia with Love* notes the importance of outback and beach settings in creating a sense of ‘Australianness’. Articles focused on the locations in which romances are set include Nancy Cook’s exploration of “Montana Romances and Geographies of Hope,” Flesch’s “The Wide Brown Land and the Big Smoke: The Setting of Australian Popular Romance,” Euan Hague’s article about the “Representation of Scotland in the United States,” “Deborah Philips’ “The Empire of Romance: Love in a Postcolonial Climate” and my own “‘A Place We All Dream About’: Greece in Mills & Boon Romances.” Further work in this area seems imminent from at least some of the academics working on a project titled “Discourse, Gender and Identity in a Corpus of Popular Romance Fiction Novels on the Canaries and Other Atlantic Islands.” In addition, the Seventh International Conference on Popular Romance Studies, to be held in 2018 and titled “Think Globally, Love Locally?”, will also no doubt lead to the publication of works on the settings of romance novels given that the **organisers have sought papers** which “address the relationship between love and locality in popular culture.”

Island Genres, Genre Islands thus both draws attention to the archipelago of research on settings in popular romance fiction and heralds the emergence of more research in the future.

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