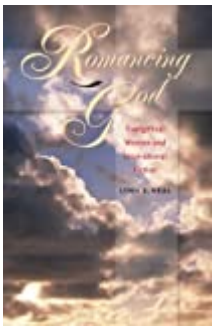
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Lynn S. Neal. *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 245 pp. $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5670-3.

Reviewed by Amy Frykholm (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-Amstdy (November, 2007)

Lynn S. Neal attempts to peer behind one of the most disparaged devotional practices in the United States: the reading of evangelical romance novels. Evangelical romance reading is discredited by intellectuals, evangelicals (who consider them frivolous), and aesthetes of any kind. While, to my knowledge, no other scholar has attempted a detailed study of evangelical romances and their readers, Neal is one of several scholars who have attempted to think about "lived" rather than theoretical religion and so have turned their attention to practices that lie at the meeting point of devotion and everyday life. Her book also lies in the tradition of those who have attempted to interrogate and understand reading practices and draws together reader, text, and author in ways that few studies do.

Based on fan mail, reader and author interviews, and some textual analysis, the book traces the history of the evangelical romance novel from its early twentieth-century beginnings to its coming of age in the 1980s to contemporary novels and readers. Neal is eager to break down her readers' likely prejudice against her "consultants" and their favorite pastime, so to cast their reading in a positive light. At times this desire not to disparage curtails Neal's analysis when she leaves intriguing statements by readers unexamined. The benefit of this approach is that her voice never overshadows or intrudes upon those who are at the center of the book. The detriment is that the women in the book speak sometimes without seeming to have been heard, and few questions are raised about their worldviews. Particularly helpful is the fact that Neal includes both African American and white readers in her study, offers glimpses of African American evangelical romances as well as the more established white tradition, and gives us a sense of differences as well as similarities between black and white readers.

One of the most interesting moments in *Romancing God*, for me, is Neal's description of the way that women in her study have used the reading of novels to sustain and refresh their faith. Because evangelicalism is a religion that is meant to be lived everyday, the reading of novels is one way that evangelical women felt connected to their faith on a daily basis. One woman described reading romances in order to "be reminded every other minute" of God's love for her. Neal describes the evangelical world as "fragile" and in need of these sustaining practices in order to remain vital. Such a description is a fascinating juxtaposition to Christian Smith's view that evangelicalism is one of the strongest and most robust of America's varieties of Christianity.[1] What is it, precisely, that makes this all-pervasive worldview both resilient and fragile?

A second helpful discussion is the bigger picture onto which evangelical women paint romance. Romance is not simply escape or pleasure–though it has elements of both. It is also the very concept through which these readers understood God's relationship to humanity and to human history. They understood God as the ultimate hero who was romancing the Church, despite "her" many failings and misfortunes toward eternal, redeemed love. Evangelical women spoke to Neal about the Bible as the "ultimate romance," and about all of history having an elaborate, romantic plot line. I wondered about the implications of this interpretation of history for evangelical women. Two contradictory elements seem to be at play. On the one hand, Neal says, Christian romances often place Christian women at key moments in history and give them a sense that people "like them" have been central to "God's work in history." Considering how often evangelical women are given a place of a second order and evangelical history is told through male action and power, this seems significant. On the other hand, the prominence of the story of Hosea in Christian romance–the story of a prophet who was told to go out and marry a prostitute as a metaphor for God's relationship with God's people–suggests that women in the novels are often symbolized as "the fallen" who are redeemed by a male hero and suggests that women need to find redemption in Christian marriage. That thread of the Christian romance hints that while women may be seeking empowerment in and through reading, they are also finding a narrative that justifies their subjugation. A lot of significant scholarly work has been done on the question of gender and power in evangelicalism, and I do not mean to quibble with it here. Rather, Neal's book raises a question for me about what effect stories of sinful women redeemed by men have on real women in settings where gendered power is complex.

Note

[1]. Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-amstdy

Citation: Amy Frykholm. Review of Neal, Lynn S., *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13801

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.