



Book-Review:  
*Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction*

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Murphy, Bernice M., and Stephen Matterson, editors. *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction*. Edinburgh University Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-1474414852.

As most of us in the field intimately know (given that the usual rationalization of our worth to the academy tends to be based in the fact), popular fiction makes up the vast majority of the literary market, in terms of both annual sales and new titles published each year. Scholars, like me, just coming into our own have benefited from the pioneering work of earlier generations of literary and cultural studies scholars who have paved the way for science fiction studies, romance studies, crime and detective fiction studies, Gothic studies, and others. Murphy and Matterson's nearly encyclopedic volume of essays, *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction*, demonstrates, however, that a significant amount of work still remains for academics wishing to steer popular fiction into theory-infested, tenure-anxious waters – even 40 years after Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) seemingly legitimized sf and 35 years after Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* applied reader response theory to romance novels. This volume shows that the work of popular fiction studies lies not so much in "legitimizing" popular fiction as an object of study (though some still need convincing) as it does in diving head-first into the vastness of the popular fiction catalog. Though Murphy and Matterson limit their scope to the popular fiction of just the past two decades, the contributors to *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction* signal that our work has just begun – but, if Murphy and Matterson's volume is any indication of the state of that beginning, we're off to a good start.

*Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction* should be best understood as a dense overview of and introduction to the scope of genres that populate the twenty-first-century popular fiction market, emphasizing those texts and genres that have had significant cultural influence in the past two decades. With twenty chapters, plus an introduction, all in 250 pages, the collection trades depth for breadth. While many will no doubt lament the exclusion of this or that genre, the overall effect is a capaciousness that comes as a relief. Murphy and Matterson ensure that an incredible range of authors and popular literary genres are covered, bringing together critical introductions to authors who have rarely appeared between the

same covers on account of the usual separation between scholarship on the major genres. Thus Max Brooks, Dan Brown, Suzanne Collins, Gillian Flynn, Tana French, Neil Gaiman, Hugh Howey, E. L. James, Stephen King, George R. R. Martin, Larry McMurtry, Stephanie Meyer, China Miéville, Grant Morrison, Jo Nesbø, Jodi Picoult, Terry Pratchett, Cherie Priest, Nora Roberts, and J. K. Rowling – whew! – are all covered. The collection thus provides an author-centric approach to popular fiction and genre, which only makes sense since the craft, success, and reputation of popular genre authors are regularly measured against their genre’s respective “giants” – one has only to look at book blurbs for new authors that claim they are a blend of authors X and Y to see that success in popular fiction is often measured in relation to the major names.

The book arranges chapters chronologically by birthdate of the authors they study. The effect, however, is not relentless, since the chapters are relatively short, ranging between eleven and thirteen pages, nor is it boring, since the tight work of each chapter is new, exciting, and thought-provoking. *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction* is thus a rather energizing read through which even the best-read among us will find something new. Such is the ethos of the collection: to suggest new directions for popular fiction studies while also modeling the kind of writing – mixing a love for the fiction with a serious, critical approach – needed to enliven the field. Murphy and Matterson refer to this in their introduction as “changing the story” of the field. They establish that the purpose of the collection is not to offer more histories of popular fiction but to “provide an informed, accessible and authoritative snapshot of the current state of popular fiction” by emphasizing “key contributions to both the individual genres or sub-genres,” bringing together essays that will serve “as starting points for further reading and research” (2).

The introduction charts some key features of popular fiction in the twenty-first century, noting, for example, the increasingly blurred boundaries between “genre” and “literary” markets; the preponderance of transmedia extensions and adaptations; the “increasing elasticity of genre” as genres increasingly blur and break rules; and the subsequent creation and hybridizing of new ones. Admittedly, however, this latter feature is not particularly new; while it is certainly possible to historicize genre hybridity in this specific historical moment, the editors make no attempt to do so. It might be that we are witnessing a moment of “genre confusion” akin to that of the late-nineteenth-century that first saw the emergence of the popular fiction market. Of course, the editors could only have addressed this by including fewer chapters and permitting a higher per-chapter word count. As the introduction demonstrates, word count proves a minor problem throughout the collection; after all, when you’ve got twelve pages to summarize the significance and cultural position of an author with a catalog as vast as Nora Roberts’s, as complex as China Miéville’s, or as transmedial as Stephen King’s, let alone to generate an original scholarly argument, much will be lost. This is an understandable – and by no means detrimental – symptom of the previously noted overall spirit of *Popular Fiction*: breadth over depth. This leads to occasionally regrettable exclusions or underdeveloping certain aspects of an argument. Matterson’s own chapter, for example, on Larry McMurtry is misbalanced toward a general history of the Western, doing very little to advance critical knowledge of McMurtry’s role, aside from noting that McMurtry produces an important dialectic between representing the “actuality” of the West’s history and the significance of (inaccurate) cultural memory and its cowboy mythology to readers. On the whole, however, the chapters generally outshine their limitations.

All twenty chapters are competently written and fulfill well their duty to provide a “snapshot” of individual authors who represent the state of popular fiction. Perhaps because of the limited length and thus limited ability to break new ground, the most impressive chapters are those that focus on writers who are truly untouched by scholarship, even as they are selling millions of copies worldwide. Jarlath Killeen’s chapter is on Nora Roberts’s romance novels and Clare Hayes-Brady’s is on Jodi Picoult’s “women’s fiction”; ironically, Killeen and Hayes-Brady reference Stephen King’s approval of both women writers in

establishing their significance, though their avid readerships and dozens of novels (over two hundred, in Roberts's case) bespeak their importance. Hayes-Brady, for example, demonstrates Picoult's masterful "movement between voices and times [that] allows Picoult to drip-feed the major moments of narrative significance to the reader, while contextualising these developments amidst moments of crisis" (150). In doing so, Picoult's *The Pact* "consolidates Picoult's abiding interest in narrative, memory, and testimony" as significant to the lives of American women (151), though it might have been useful to note the demographics of Picoult's readers. Likewise, Brian Cliff's chapter on Tana French's Irish mystery novels, Stephen Kenneally's chapter on science-fiction writer Hugh Howey's use of self-publishing, and Catherine Siemann's chapter on Cherie Priest's race- and eco-critical steampunk novels all offer excellent critical dissection. These youngest authors surveyed in the collection represent the greatest prospects for popular fiction studies modelled by Murphy and Matterson's collection.

*Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction* is an important resource for the growing field of popular fiction studies. It marks "popular fiction" as something separate from, but imbricated with, the study of popular culture more generally (see, for example, the work of *The Journal of Popular Culture*, where popular fiction articles regularly show up but by no means as the majority of what they publish), and a field that needs greater vision of sight than the limited scope offered by science fiction studies or romance studies. Murphy and Matterson's collection is, in essence, an argument for the formulation of a sincere field of popular fiction studies like that put forward by Ken Gelder in his 2004 book *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*, but never truly advanced since then; Murphy and Matterson's book makes clear the need for something like a journal of popular fiction studies.

Of course, *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction* falls victim to some of the issues plaguing the study of popular fiction more generally; it is Ameri- and Eurocentric in its survey of authors, and though it covers women and men nearly equally (nine to eleven), not a *single* writer of color is surveyed, nor is there much diversity with regard to sexuality, (dis)ability, or religious background. This is partly because, like most aspects of popular culture production, popular fiction is largely written by white men and women, with significantly different disparities across genres (for example, sf and the Western have been predominantly written by men, romance by women). Still, it would not have been difficult – to take one example – to reach out to scholars of black popular fiction, whether of science fiction, horror, or romance, especially given that important new work has been forwarded in each of these areas in recent years, particularly given the rise of Afrofuturism and the growth of black romance imprints/publishers. Truthfully, any survey of twenty-first-century popular fiction that does not cover non-white, non-heterosexual authors should not be considered a very thorough survey of twenty-first-century popular fiction.

Regardless, Murphy and Matterson have created an important model for future work that accomplishes the sort of scholarship, despite sacrificing depth for breadth, desperately needed to develop the field. *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction* is a must-need for scholars of popular fiction across the genres and across media, and it even raises questions about the place of a comics auteur like Grant Morrison and, by extension, the place of comics themselves within the fold of popular literary studies. It is a volume that I hope marks the beginning of a new era in popular fiction scholarship.

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