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Romantic Escapes in Contemporary Popular Romance Fiction

“There is nothing people are so often deceived in as the state of their own affections.”

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (118)

Meeting fellow victims of amorous deception and tagging along on their quest for true affection has always been at the core of romantic fiction, regardless of formulaic conventions, implied readership, literary merit or explicit political agenda. That helps to understand the success and resilience of popular romance across historical periods and despite social and cultural revolutions, irrespective even of ill-reputation and critical disdain. For, two decades into the twenty-first century, popular romance flaunts a matchless versatility to adapt to the demands, lifestyles and ideological affiliation of an increasingly diverse readership, to the crisis and challenges of publishing, and to the tastes and political stance of the critics. Critical appraisal of romance has also changed substantially in the last decades, from the “opprobrium of earlier feminist writers” such as Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone or Germaine Greer (Stacey and Pearce 11) to the consolidation of the so-called third wave of scholarly work on popular romance fiction, which has witnessed an exponential surge in the twenty-first century. Over the last two decades, the genre has evinced an inexhaustible flexibility and adaptability to the demands of the industry, and more significantly, of its diverse and ever-changing readership and, consequently, it has also garnered renewed and re-focused scholarly attention.

Undoubtedly, the twenty-first-century romance scholarship is decidedly leaving behind the criticism of the genre which characterized

the first wave of scholarly work (Anderson; Snitow), which presented romance “as a vehicle that habituated women to their gendered oppression and thus perpetuated patriarchy” (Teo “The Contemporary Anglophone Romance Genre” 19). As Stevi Jackson contends in her 1995 article “Women and Heterosexual Love: Complicity, Resistance and Change,” feminist critiques of romance and, especially of its portrayal of heterosexual romantic love, had their source in this feminist wave: “[w]here these writers considered romantic fiction, as in the case of Greer, it was represented simply as ‘dope for dupes’ – a means of brainwashing women into subservience. The emphasis, then, was unequivocally on the dangers of love and romance for women” (50) and, in the first wave of scholarship, romances were scorned as works that diminished women and lacked depth, complexity and gravity; the genre as a whole was shelved away as a mass-produced form of entertainment for mediocre readers. In response to those critical views, a second wave of romance criticism emerged that partly shifted its focus towards the genre’s mechanisms. Pivotal works including Modleski’s *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982) and Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984), these works nonetheless continued to place the gender dimension at the centre of the debate, still preoccupied with “whether romance is empowering or oppressive – good or bad – for women” (Teo “The Contemporary Anglophone Romance Genre” 19).

The evolution of the genre combined with new and more flexible academic practices and interests has now brought about a long overdue and more interdisciplinary approach. The critics of the so-called third wave have largely moved beyond traditional assessments of romance as a form of vicarious escapism; on the contrary, romances are now explored from new angles and with the critical lens focused on the multiple, nuanced and, at times, contradictory cultural messages of the genre. This third wave is also proving remarkably productive. Seminal scholarly work from this bout of new perspectives and critical approaches include Deborah Philips’s *Women’s Fiction from 1945 to Today* (2006), Laura Vivanco’s *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance* (2011), Sarah S.G. Frantz and Eric Murphy Selinger’s *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction* (2012), Hsu-Ming Teo’s *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels* (2012), Kristin Ramsdell’s *Romance: A Guide to the Genre* (2012), Jayashree

Kamblé's *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology* (2014), Joseph Crawford's *The Twilight of the Gothic?: Vampire Fiction and the Rise of the Paranormal Romance* (2014), William Gleason's and Eric Murphy Selinger's *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?* (2015), Amy Burge's *Representing Difference in the Medieval and Modern Orientalist Romance* (2016), Lisa Fletcher's *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity* (2016), Jay Dixon's *The Romantic Fiction of Mills & Boon, 1909–1995* (2018), Catherine Roach's *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture* (2018) or María Ramos-García and Laura Vivanco's *Love, Language, Place and Identity in Popular Culture: Romancing the Other* (2020), to name but a few. The most recent addition to this third wave in the academia has been the publication of *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction* (2020) edited by Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger and Hsu-Ming Teo, which incorporates chapters by a good number of consolidated popular romance scholars whose ground-breaking research has cemented criticism of popular romance as a burgeoning and cross-disciplinary field of study.

The contribution of the third wave of romance studies is immense, as shown by Kamblé, Selinger and Teo's introduction to the scholarly tradition on the genre (2020). The works in this wave have explored the increasingly diverse romance subgenres from a wide range of disciplines which include cultural studies, queer and gender studies, communication studies, sociolinguistics, history and postcolonial studies, among others. Hsu-Ming Teo's *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels*, for instance, revises the Western tradition of Orientalism and examines the way in which such a discourse and its changing orientalist tropes have been reproduced in popular sheikh romance. Teo chronologically traces a "cultural history of the Orientalist representation of interracial, cross-cultural, and romantic liaisons between Western women and Arab men in popular culture of romance throughout the 20th and 21st centuries" (7); Kamblé's *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction* presents a detailed analysis of the state of mass-market romance fiction in the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Canada looking at how the romantic formula has "allowed the influx of intriguing new concerns" including "capitalism, war and ethnicity" (22); Sarah Frantz

and Eric Murphy Selinger's edited collection, *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, offers a wide coverage of topics dealt with in the popular romance genre. Its contributors examine individual authors and novels as well as fan responses, with the aim of breaking the previous trend of drawing wide-ranging conclusions about the genre or its subgenres. However timely and relevant, this collection overwhelmingly covers romances published by US authors, with little or no reference to romance authors outside the American context.

Varied as they are in their approaches and the corpus and subgenres of romance that they cover, what all the works published in this third wave significantly have in common is that they have shifted academic perceptions of romance from standpoints which deemed the genre as static, as "unchanged and unchanging" (Markert 4), and perpetuated "the impulse to frame their discussion in terms of the genre as a whole" (Frantz and Selinger 5) onto more nuanced and diverse critical readings. At the same time, all those studies have proved that producing and consuming romance is much more than a mere escapist act; it is also inherently political (Vivanco). Therefore, they have resituated popular romance as offering readers and critics much more than an act of evasive reading or the unreflective consumption of romantic experiences. In so doing, these books have questioned the genre's initial discredit and avoided drawing broad conclusions out of the analysis of a fairly limited corpus of novels or reader experiences so common in early works (Mussell; Modleski; Radway).

The renovated interest in the genre in the last decades is also evidenced, in Kristin Ramsdell's opinion (xxii), by the profusion of academic research grants devoted to romance and by the creation of its own academic association: the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance, which edits the specialized *Journal of Popular Romance* since 2010, as well as by research groups and regular conferences and events in universities throughout the world (see Kamblé, Selinger and Teo).¹ Likewise, at the turn of the twenty-first century, popular romance began to enter the syllabuses of university degrees in the Humanities

1 For a survey of the current research on romance in the different universities around the world, see the "Introduction" to *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction* (2020).

and it is now well established with countless modules and seminars in an increasing number of countries, which attests to the expanding academic interest in the genre.² Representative of this refreshed attention to the genre is also the reprinting in 2018, as part of the Routledge Revival series, of books discussing popular fiction from an innovative perspective at the time, such as *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction* originally edited by Jean Radford in 1986.³ Such a volume is marketed online by Routledge as presenting “a historical perspective on a specific form of popular fiction: the romance” and “rejecting the notion that they are a contaminated by-product of industrialism” (Routledge.com). Thus, highlighting the volume’s progressive approach to the genre, and targeting an audience of readers and critics that currently align with a view that thirty years ago was not so widely accepted.

This proliferation of leading-edge academic research on romance may, nonetheless, be considered scarce if quantitatively compared with the number of popular romance novels sold and read every year: “[s]ince the twenty-first century, romance novels have generated over \$1.3 billion dollars in sales *per annum* in the United States, where one out of four books sold and one out of two mass-market books sold are romance novels” (Teo 2). Evidence has it that the scope, production, and range of popular romance has continued to diversify throughout the early twenty-first century, reaching an astonishing variety of imprints, categories, and sub-genre combinations. As an example, Ken Gelder lists the different “brand portfolios” (46) from the most popular romance publishing houses with series categories that identify subgenres of romance: Modern, Tender,

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- 2 On some occasions, the courses use a literary criticism approach; on others, they are offered as part of a creative writing scheme. For a very small sample, see the courses ‘Reader, I Married Him’: The Evolution of Romance Fiction from 1740 to the Present” offered by Dr. Joseph Crawford at the University of Exeter (<<https://intranet.exeter.ac.uk/humanities/studying/undergraduates/modules/EAS3225/2019-0/>>); “Happily Ever After: Love Stories and American Culture” offered by Heather Schell at George Washington University (<<https://writingprogram.gwu.edu/spring-2016-uw1020-courses#Schell,%20Heather>>) or “Writing Popular Genre Fiction” offered by Hsu-Ming Teo at Macquarie University (<<http://handbook.mq.edu.au/2019/Units/UGUnit/ENGL236>>).
 - 3 For a discussion of the context in which this book emerged and its significance at the time, see Deborah Philips (6).

Sensual, Medical, Historical, and Blaze (Mills and Boon); or Desire, Sensation, and Intrigue (Silhouette). Beyond these, the list goes on to include other developments or subgenre combinations from the more Classical, Gothic, Thriller, or Fantasy romance to the more reader-oriented Chick Lit, Black (and African-American) romance and the, arguably, more radically modern Lesbian or Gay romance, and so on.

Additionally, in the new millennium, reading and publishing practices have also expanded with an increasing use of the Internet, where websites, blogs, and other online hubs offer resources for readers to participate in discussions of the novels. These multiply by the day on a global scale, both in generalist reader sites, like Goodreads and Amazon, and in specialist fandom websites such as Smart Bitches, Trashy Books; All about Romance; Harlequin Junkie; Heroes and Heartbreakers and Addicted to Romance, to name but a few. All in all, romance fiction has undeniably adapted like no other genre to readers' demands and new consuming practices, which, according to Olivia Tapper, is another irrefutable proof of its progressiveness: "how is a genre supposedly so 'formulaic, repetitive and unchanging' not merely surviving but flourishing under the increasingly technocratic conditions of a publishing sector experiencing what may be its most significant transitional period since the era of Gutenberg?" (250). Indeed, contemporary popular romance shows a versatility to cater for the readers' ever-changing profiles and to the new production and consumption patterns that is "unmatched by most other types of publishing and popular media" (Lee 54). For Tapper, the genre has always been very sensitive to customer demands and market trends and has evolved accordingly:

[t]hrough strategies such as diversification of content, cultivation of reader feedback, early adoption of ebook technology and consistently strong branding, publishers of romantic fiction have shown a marked willingness to work within, not against, the changing times, in this way applying innovative and forward-thinking solutions to the exigent conditions of the post-millennial book trade. (251)

This volume, much indebted to the critical predecessors mentioned above, seeks to enlarge the vibrant scholar exchange of the third wave, which is mapping out the current state of contemporary romance. It attempts to do so by bringing together twelve chapters which explore a wide range of contemporary and historical romances published at the turn of or in the

first decades of the twenty-first century in different countries – US, New Zealand, India, Britain, the Caribbean, Japan, and Spain. The contributors are scholars from different literary traditions and critical disciplines including cultural studies, literary studies, sociolinguistics, postcolonial studies and gender studies, who also come from a variety of geographical contexts: Japan, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Finland; this helps to complement the, so far, more prevalent American and Australian critical approaches to the genre.

Even if Kamblé, Selinger and Teo contend that “new research on the texts, reception, distribution, publishing, and readership of popular romance cannot constantly return to the same few foundational studies” (2020 Kindle), our volume draws from one of the tropes which, according to Pamela Regis, has underpinned the genre’s most dismissive and enduring criticism since the 1970s: that of bondage. In her pioneering work *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Regis attributes the overwhelming negative critical characterization of the romance novel to the critical tradition inaugurated by feminist critic Germaine Greer presenting “the romance novel as an enslaver of women” (4). Our overall aim is to probe the multiple ways in which romance fiction in the new millennium (both novels and TV adaptations of romance novels), rather than enslaving women, presents them with varied forms of escape and stimulates their reflection on social and political issues that affect them. In so doing, these romances meet the challenges of the digital age and display a richness of offers, of thought-provoking “escapes” – in the form of both pleasurable and intellectual journeys – and of alleyways that allow readers to immerse themselves in debates ranging from ecology to feminism, from capitalism to cultural exoticism, among others.

At the core of the genre’s critical disregard have lain, together with the notion of enslavement, the mechanisms involved in the production and reception of romance. Granted romance fiction is inherently formulaic – for a work of fiction to be considered a romance, it has to adhere to specific formal parameters (Regis)⁴ – and has traditionally been mass-produced with a female readership in mind by publishing houses which

4 Definitions by Romance Writers Associations vary in their level of detail as that provided by the UK Romantic Novelist Association (RNA) and that of the Romance Writers of America show (Teo 3).

have become brand names like Harlequin Mills & Boon. Such criticism, nonetheless, stems from a limited understanding of the genre which fails to appreciate its inherent characteristics and its ability to adapt to (g)local demands. Disregarding Harlequin Mills & Boon novels as run-of-the-mill, unelaborate narratives which are unworthy of serious critical analysis is failing to recognize, as Laura Vivanco has poignantly stated, that “HM&Bs vary greatly but the very best of them . . . are more than a type of entertainment which provides quick thrills” (*For Love and Money*: 203). Consequently, the chapters in this volume approach popular romances as texts that lend themselves to nuanced critical readings, and depart from the notion that “it is possible both to know these texts for ‘what they are’ and to take them seriously” (Philips 9). As Kamblé, Selinger and Teo argue, the chapters draw from the idea that “the romance novel provides a public platform for women not only to voice ideals about gender, sexuality and family relationships, but also to articulate opinions about contemporary social, cultural, environmental, economic, and political issues” (2020, Introduction).

With these notions in mind, the twelve chapters in this volume discuss recent developments in the production, consumption, and distribution of popular romance, as well as thematic changes that account for its increasing complexity and richness, and acknowledge its importance as one of the most popular and widely read genres. The texts examined in the volume include the conventional Harlequin Mills & Boon novels but also the recent success of new subgenres such as, royal or rugby romances, so as to explore the ways in which romance publishing has infused innovation into the system and the genre has continuously reinvented itself. This collection evinces that a careful look from within the genre of romance, which recognizes and departs from its specificities, reveals its complexity and its interconnections with other popular forms, like science fiction, thrillers, or adventure stories (Kaler and Johnson-Kurek 4). The volume thus examines the ways in which authors of romance have escaped from constraints and fixed generic traditions in order to bend the traditional formulae of the romance and blend the genre with other popular forms, which, not exceptionally, allows them to incorporate a clear ethico-political agenda, or accommodate the demands of a particular readership in non-Western locations. Concurrently, one chapter in the volume is devoted to the analysis of the

adaptation of chick lit in Japan, another one focuses on romance novels in India and two further ones examine novels that might not fully adhere to pure definitions of popular romance such as those proposed by the RWA or RNA, but deploy its conventions differently: one integrating romance as its driving force and the other engaging with the genre in its discussion of the antiromance.

The volume is divided into four parts to account for four major thematic trends, which include: the rich intertextual fabric of contemporary romance, the accommodation of contemporary feminist dilemmas to the business requirements of the post-millennial global marketplace, the return to exotic tropes in their effort to brand specific national and cultural identities and, finally, the new generic crossroads giving way to innovative genre twists to accommodate new political and aesthetic developments. The collection opens with the section entitled "Romance and Its Intertextual Fabric," which contains chapters by Joseph Crawford, Deborah Philips, and Elina Valovirta considering the problematics posed by some of the contexts and formulaic features of popular romance fiction as old and new dilemmas that are being refigured in the context of contemporary romance fiction. The first chapter "Old-World Heroes and New-World Heroines in Post-Millennial Anglophone Romance Media" by Joseph Crawford explores the relationship between past and present through the analysis of popular romances that feature British or American heroines who fall in love with heroes from earlier historical eras such as sheikhs, vampires, or Scottish Highlanders who, as Crawford argues, "are represented as being more desirable precisely because they are associated with the cultures of the 'old world.'" In this chapter, Crawford traces the constant attraction for the past in post-millennial romance media looking at the romcom *Kate and Leopold*, Karen Marie Moning's novel *Kiss of the Highlander*, Olivia Gates's sheik romance *The Desert Lord's Baby*, and Diana Gabaldon's time-travel romance *Outlander* as well as its TV adaptation. The second chapter, by Deborah Philips, entitled "Fifty Shades of Romance: The Intertextualities of *Fifty Shades of Grey*" examines the allegedly innovative publishing phenomenon by E.L. James considering its intertextual relation both with nineteenth-century romances and contemporary Mills and Boon novels which, Philips argues, clearly inspired James's trilogy. Philips concludes that for all its apparent innovation, James's novel continues to reinforce

old structural patterns and ideologies already identified by feminist critics in the first wave of romance criticism.) The section closes with Elina Valovirta's chapter "The Stuff of Which Fairy Tales Are Made: Royal Romance, Ordinariness and Affectivity in the Literary Market," which considers a long-standing source of feminist controversy, that of royal weddings, now restyled in the wake of recent royalty-commoner marriages. The chapter analyses three novels published as ebooks, sold cheaply and consumed tacitly, as well as the paratexts that contribute to their commodification. In this respect, Valovirta points towards the interconnections between romance and its marketing business and in so doing, bridges the thematic concerns of the first and second section of the volume.

The second section, under the heading, "Readers and the Market always at Heart," looks into the close connections between romance, consumerism, and feminism – in particular, contemporary feminist dilemmas – and the, no longer so, paradox of a genre that is produced mainly by women, consumed massively by women and yet has been for years deemed as a trap for women. This section includes three chapters that shed light on current marketing and reading strategies, which focus on promotion stratagems and explain the success of the genre and its connections with affective capitalism. The chapters in this section investigate the new conditions in which popular romance is written and published in one of its healthiest market contexts, that of the USA, concentrating on the relationship between social and market trends and the thematic contents of the novels. The first chapter, "Nora Roberts's Boonsboro Empire: Boosting Business through Romance, Invigorating Romance with Affective Capitalism," considers novels by the so-called queen of romance Nora Roberts. Drawing from Illouz's theories, Carolina Fernández Rodríguez analyzes symbolic elements, such as recurrent and commonplace metaphors to represent love, thematic components such as the courtship of the hero and heroine, and the characterization of the hero as a warrior or businessman, as well as the marketing strategies used to promote and commodify not merely the books themselves, but also elements evoked by the novels' settings and plots – ranging from hotel stays to restaurants and bookshops – which contribute to the happily ever after marriage of romantic love to capitalism. As Fernández Rodríguez argues, "Nora Roberts does indeed master the romanticization of

commodities, but she then moves beyond that by using her trilogy to promote the actual businesses she owns in Boonsboro, Maryland.” The next chapter, by Inmaculada Pérez-Casal, expands on this marriage between business and romance as it explores the notion of marketplace feminism in her analysis of Lisa Kleypas’s Ravenels series. Pérez-Casal focuses on the writing and selling of the last three books in the series, *Devil in Spring* (2017), *Hello Stranger* (2018), and *Devil’s Daughter* (2019), which have placed this author at the frontline of a renewed romance writing which, in the wave of feminist protests in the United States, is committed to women’s rights and, thus, labelled as feminist in line with similar trends in “marketplace feminism” (Zeisler). The final chapter in this section, “Romance Reading as Fandom in the Context of Convergence Culture” by Carmen Pérez Ríu, analyses the incorporation of fandom practices as forms of re-appropriations of the reading material by readers forming communities on online fandom hubs. This chapter also considers the activities of fans as interpretive communities, who re-read romances and contribute to re-establishing their signification. These practices are a major development in post-millennium popular culture and contribute to the dynamic re-assessment of the genre by amateur critics who are emotionally involved in sustaining and promoting the quality of the books they love.

Under the heading “Loving and Rebranding the Exotic,” the third part of the book delves into the relationship between popular romances and concepts of exoticism and constructed national identities. The chapters in this section analyze three different contexts. The first one, by Paloma Fresno-Calleja, entitled “Rugby Romances and the Branding of New Zealand,” studies the relationship between a subgenre of contemporary romance set in New Zealand and official tourist promotion campaigns that largely rely on stereotypical cultural elements such as Māori All Black players, eroticized as romance heroes, and present the country as a paragon of interracial harmony, as evident in the successful relationships portrayed in the novels. As the author argues, “rugby romances set in New Zealand and produced by local authors (and ironically also by foreign ones) have benefitted from the comprehensive process of national branding to create and sell their works, while they in turn collaborate in the reinforcement and circulation of official narratives of New Zealand as ‘100 % Pure.’” The second chapter in this

section, "Constructing the Exotic Other: Paradise Discourse and Environmental Awareness in a Corpus of Popular Romance Fiction Novels," by M. Isabel González Cruz, reflects upon the relationship between post-millennial environmental awareness and exoticized environments such as the Canary Islands, popularized and commodified as tourist "paradises" and, therefore, as ideal spaces for romance. The chapter explores the construction of a paradise discourse through the examination of the linguistic and discursive strategies used to represent the exoticism of the islands in a corpus of thirty-five Harlequin and Mills and Boon novels published between 1995 and 2004. The third chapter, "Romance Novels in Postcolonial India: From Mills & Boon to Pageturn's Red Romance Series," by Alejandra Moreno Álvarez, considers the state of popular romance fiction in India, paying particular attention to the appearance of a new imprint of popular romances under the label Red Romances that, according to the author, have adapted the requirements of the formula to the changing demands and tastes of contemporary Indian readers.

"New Political and Generic Twists," the final section, opens with "L-bungaku, Oshigoto Shosetsu, and Wa-mama Shosetsu: Chick Lit in Contemporary Japanese Sociocultural Contexts," an assessment of a recent trend in the Japanese popular romance market. According to Miyuki Hanabusa, the genre allows for the reconciliation of professional ambitions and the demands of a family, an old dilemma in Western societies that signals at new prospects of acceptability for working mothers in the Japanese rigid working environments. The second chapter, entitled "Genre Bending and Blending in Malorie Blackman's Noughts and Crosses YA Series," by Irene Pérez-Fernández, examines the first three novels of the series, namely: *Noughts & Crosses* (2001), *Knife Edge* (2004) and *Checkmate* (2005), as an example of the combination of the popular genres of romance and YA literature, which introduce generic innovations to produce an ethically and politically committed narrative. In so doing, Blackman's novels fill in a gap in YA British literature which, as the author argues, "has traditionally failed to portray issues of ethnic diversity and, as such, they should be considered as a literary exercise of re/writing dominant discourses around love and a tool to re/right socio-historical wrongs." Finally, the last chapter in the book opens a different research line by considering the concept of antiromance as a key term for a different response to feminist conceptions of the romance

plot in contemporary popular fiction set in postcolonial contexts. Elisa Serna-Martínez contemplates this trend within the Caribbean publishing context and analyzes Opal Palmer Adisa's *Painting Away Regrets* (2011) as an innovative novel which crosses genre borders and, according to the author, should be read as a Caribbean antiromance. As such, the novel presents elements of romance shaped outside the mandate of the Happily Ever After (HEA) while it "engages critically in the process of rebuilding nationalist, imperialist and diasporic discourses through narratives of intimacy."

On the whole, the chapters collected in this volume provide detailed readings of contemporary popular romances in their various forms of escape, from literal acts of armchair traveling to literary exercises of genre blending while exploring the expanding possibilities of the genre and its ability to incorporate ethico-political concerns in the global world. The authors of the chapters embrace interdisciplinary methodologies and analytical strategies, allowing for flexible and nuanced perspectives of analysis in their discussion of new developments in contemporary popular romance fiction. On the one hand, this approach sheds light onto the ways in which the formulae keep adapting to different cultural environments and publishing markets; on the other, it reassesses popular romance fiction as a global phenomenon that deserves close and ongoing scrutiny.

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