Heroes and Happy Endings: Class, Gender, and Nation in Popular Film and Fiction in Interwar Britain by Christine Grandy

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014.
(ISBN: 978-0-7190-9093-6). 242pp.

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> When his breed of men dies out that's the end. And it's a better breed of men than any of us will ever make.
>
> – *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935)

> JAMES BOND: Well, I like to do some things the old-fashioned way.
>
> EVE: Sometimes the old ways are best.
>
> —*Skyfall* (2014)

The 'Studies in Popular Culture' series by Manchester University Press 'aims to provide an arena for the cross-fertilisation' of cultural history and cultural studies, resulting in 'readable and accessible' studies of 'where we are now socially and culturally and how we got to where we are'. Christine Grandy's contribution to this series, *Heroes and happy endings: Class, gender, and nation in popular film and fiction in interwar Britain* (2014), constructs a view of interwar ideology, foundational to modern Britain, through its inception and continuation through the bestsellers and blockbusters of the 1920s and 1930s. A mass-cultural historian at the University of Lincoln, Grandy portrays a collective spectre of British anxieties following the First World War through the most successful popular-cultural film and fictional artifacts. Drawing from cultural theorists, such as Foucault and Adorno, Grandy presents a 'readable and accessible' account of the role of film and fiction that departs from 'a prevailing emphasis on mass culture as both escapist and largely democratic'. The extent to which Grandy is successful in this is the topic of the current review.

In her introduction Grandy makes clear that the 'workings' of the film and book industry will not be examined in her study (p.7). Instead she uses queer theory to explore the truths and performances of sexuality and gender in the narratives of love and villainy (p.8). These narratives are thus read as 'effective means of governing', in Foucault's sense of 'Governance', 'a population in crisis' (p.8). This population's voice is found in Mass Observation studies, as well as in the records of the Home Office and the BBFC. Grandy then infers, from where the silence of censors coincides with the commercial success of a book or a film, the most acceptable and pleasing conceptions of class, gender and nation through the narratives' heroes, villains, and love-interests.

Arguing that 'there can be no other dominant organising principle when it comes to a marriage of social and cultural history' other than 'popularity', Grandy's study of 'the narratives that large amounts of Britons consumed in their valuable spare time' is a refreshing and democratic conservative view of interwar Britain at a time when most scholars focus on the rise and fall of high modernism (p.18). In her departure from the much-documented upper-class cultures of interwar Britain, Grandy 'sidesteps the intellectuals, the bohemian elites, and sexual radicals in favour of something less refined, and clearly more conservative' (p.19). Specifically, she aims to provide 'a critical look at the works of lowbrow male authors writing broad thrillers and adventure stories' and their generic equivalents on screen (p.25).

In her introduction, Grandy imparts a crucial caveat to the reader: many important records of readership and audience figures were destroyed in World War II (p.23). This lack of data has severe implications regarding her argument that women and men were *equally* exposed to and influenced by popular-cultural artifacts (p.26). Nevertheless, Grandy's argument is structured around the consistent character-components of the most popular books and films of the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, the first three chapters of the book respectively explicate the form and function of the interwar archetypes of hero, villain, and female love-interest (p.30). In her first chapter, Grandy argues that fictional heroes of the period were easily recognisable by masculine characteristics of work and nation that were destabilised in the aftermath of the First World War (p.40). The disparity between real and fictional spaces is noted in popular novels of the time where the actual war is almost completely absent from the text as equivocation of trench warfare with Englishmanliness

could not be upheld (p.44). Thus, Grandy argues that the returning soldiers could not reconcile their experience of war with a peace-time society which maintained traditional masculine attitudes of nation yet also was unable to find a place for these returning soldiers due to post-war economic deflation and mass unemployment. This situation was mitigated, she argues, by the fictional hero-type's 'happy ending': his inevitable reintegration into the collective whole as a valued member (p.77). The hero is easily recognisable in polar opposition to the villain, the subject of the book's second chapter. First noting that the villain character of the 1920s and 1930s was not of the previous melodramatic, moustache-twirling, aristocratic type, Grandy then argues that the interwar villain was represented in 'multiple new types of villainy that existed in seemingly respectable and middle-class personages' (p.84). Blurring the line of identification between hero and villain with his handsome visage, ordinary demeanour and performance of 'Englishness' (p.85), the deceptively-unassuming younger villain resonated with the public's concerns of social mobility profiteering. Here she could have more effectively utilized performance theory to uncover the extent of interwar anxieties about inauthenticity in everyday and structured performances.

Despite this, Grandy is much more persuasive in discussing villainy than heroism, representing the villain-type as 'a definition of what was wrong with society for the reader and viewer'. Stating that this villain, as partially-constructed from tabloid scandal headlines, is 'very much entrenched in the period in which he or she was formed' (p.85), Grandy attributes lack of attention given to this character to 'the developing schism between high and low culture' in the interwar years (p.87). Grandy is then able to clarify the heroic values she established in her first chapter. Thus she offers a perspective often 'overlooked by both historians and scholars of media studies', 'in favour of an emphasis on the affirmative values embodied by the hero': that 'the changeable and contemporary aspects of the villain that are key to the enduring qualities of the hero at the formula's centre' (p.85). The chapter closes with ruminations of the reluctance of novels between 1937 and 1939 to cast Germany/Nazis as villains. The villainous subject more consistently spoke to anxieties of ubiquitous profiteering in big business and the government. While the lack of villainous Nazis is indeed a surprising discovery, I think Grandy is often at pains equivocate an imagined collective of popular writers. As Oppehnheim's *Extrodinary*

Envoy (1937) and *Exit a Dictator* (1939) show, some writers were more pro-Nazi-German than others, such as Charteris who, in *Prelude for War*, 'explicitly identified German Nazis as enemies of Britain and 'Jew-baiters,' a lone voice in identifying anti-Semitism in Germany among these novels' (p.126). I feel this section would be stronger if she clearly acknowledged the idiosyncrasies of the writers instead of attributing all to the pop-culture machine.

The book's third chapter establishes the role of the female love-interest of the hero. The heterosexual relationship between the two turns upon what Grandy calls a 'magic moment' that usually signals a 'happy ending' (p.133) not only in romance novels, but also crucially in 'thrillers, adventure, and detective stories made by and for men' (p.137). Though the lack of interwar-readership data may not entirely support those assertions of audience-gender exclusivity, Grandy nevertheless convincingly argues that this 'magic moment' where the female love-interest authentically renounces their 'false performances' of financial independence and social mobility for the 'authentic' love of the hero effectively reinstated pre-war values of masculine nation and economy (p.136). Grandy argues that female love-interests from every distinguishable class and financial situation were ultimately equivocated and pacified at the magic moment, thus allaying chauvinistic anxieties of the increasing powerful suffragette movement; or they remained upwardly-mobile but were consequently branded villainesses (p.142). The success of this chapter is due, I believe, to its use of Foucault's and Butler's theories of gender performativity in an argument that exposes the implications of performance and inauthentic living in interwar narratives and of the public's anxieties surrounding such performances. Grandy's selected examples here are on the whole well-balanced (between books and films). Her refreshing approach gives greater importance to lesser known works popular at the time but since fallen out of fashion: so *The Thirty-Nine Steps* can be considered alongside *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, for example. That said, her reluctance to discuss the creative process leaves the reader curious as to the true influence and motivations of the producers ('they') in, for example, forcing a magic moment and happy ending in Hitchcock's *Champagne* (1928) where he envisioned a 'higher' moral conclusion (p.166).

Following the work of Annett Kuhn (1988) Grandy argues, in her penultimate chapter, for a conception of the interwar censorship activities of the Home Office and

British Board of Film Censors as constitutive of the 'ideological fantasy' of heroic work and nation (p.178). Grandy analyses the censor-approved works of popular culture using censorship to mean the 'silent production of an ideology' that 'buttressed' the heroic model of the breadwinning male and the chaste and loyal female love-interest, while condemning villainous profiteers. Using Home Office records and the scenario reports of the BBFC, Grandy characterises a government that sought to appear concerned about the public's exposure to certain images while it actively maintained 'normative truths [...] of sexuality and gender that governed a stable society' (p.181). The chapter features fascinating internal discussions within these surprisingly modest organisations. Grandy uses the infamous trial of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) and the subsequent banning of the novel and others to support this view. The voice of censorship is also portrayed as priggish in the scenario reports of the BBFC's only examiner of the early 1930s: the cantankerous Colonel Hanna. Hanna's words are Grandy's most powerful rhetorical device when exploring 'deviat[ions] from the culture industry formula' (p.185): 'We do not allow English officers in uniform to be shown as cowards in the field.' Provocative as the claim is that film censorship in this period was down to one man's opinions, it is perhaps too convenient for Grandy to suppose that, as a thriller-reader and possible-action-film-attendee, Hanna shows that 'censors and audience [...] cannot be distinguished from each other easily' (p.197). Grandy concludes her study by highlighting the potential of popular-culture studies beyond 1939, claiming that interwar anxieties did not evaporate after World War II.

Heroes and happy endings successfully explores the notion of merely 'escapist' popular culture in the 1920s and 1930s. Despite the tragic lack of sources offering comprehensive demographics of the period, Grandy effectively argues and articulates, from the books and films themselves, the political and gender anxieties and aspirations of a morally and financially bruised Britain. While at times key cultural critics may have been used more frequently to increase the impact of her argument, Grandy's immensely readable and engaging study is a welcome addition to studies in popular culture. Most of all she reminds us of the haunting complexities of an ideology that has survived in Britain since its interwar popular formation. Even if these 'old ways' are not always the 'best', despite Eve's claims to James Bond, they are certainly enduring.