

**Kim Wilkins, Beth Driscoll and Lisa Fletcher. *Genre Worlds: Popular Fiction and Twenty-First-Century Book Culture*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2022. 272 pages. Hardback ISBN: 9781625346629 USD\$90.00 Paperback ISBN: 9781625346612 USD\$28.95**

It isn't often that an academic text is as readable as a thrilling, sumptuously sexy, or absorbingly imaginative novel, yet *Genre Worlds* can be described using every review-trawling author's dream description: unputdownable. Kim Wilkins, Beth Driscoll, and Lisa Fletcher have collaborated to put forth an exciting new concept for reading, contextualising, and even writing genre fiction. They propose a "genre worlds model" which "recognizes that popular fiction's most compelling characteristics are its connected social, industrial, and textual practices" (1). While the *Genre Worlds* authors dabble in and draw from several theories across the interdisciplinary landscapes this book inhabits (literary, fan, genre, and publishing studies to name a few), they ultimately seek out and largely utilise Howard S. Becker's theory of "art worlds" which they assert "acknowledges the centrality of the artist but locates the artist within a radiating network" (15). With their interview-forward approach they are successful in achieving this centrality as well as extending the concept into fresh territory where radiating networks include digital spheres. The authors claim that their update to Becker's approach is one in which they attempt to capture the "dramatic effects of digital technological changes on genre worlds over the past two decades" (17) and they are mostly very successful in capturing the "shifting value placed on physical and live practices" (17).

In the introduction, the authors promise a focus on "creative collaborations, industrial paradigms, and affective communities" (2) which is effectively delivered through seven chapters. The chapters offer detailed insights into the mechanisms of publishing industries, transnationalism and transmedia, writerly relationships, writing and fan communities both in-person and online, and the function of textual analysis through the lens of their genre worlds concept. The move from a predominant focus on textual analysis (although, as noted, that is also included) into deep and intertwined social and industrial analysis is a welcome and timely one. The authors' methods include "interviewing multiple participants and analyzing genre-based associations, conventions, and interpersonal relationships" (8). They have also read genres themselves extensively and researched within databases such as Nielsen BookScan. They describe the resulting data from which their arguments and analysis are largely drawn as "medium data" which "is not massive to the point of being unable to be read but is also larger than a study of a single book or author" (25). A sweet spot has been hit as *Genre Worlds* provides a scope which is both necessarily restricted yet broadly applicable. This is evident in their choice to investigate "fantasy," "crime," and "romance" in detail. They assert that these terms "denote a kind of book in the marketplace, and the terms allow us to talk about these books without becoming beholden to taxonomies that seek to impose rigidity, given that elasticity is valued by many stakeholders in genre worlds" (19). Each of their chosen case studies falls under these categories, and there is a sound balance between analysis and acknowledgement of exploratory and boundary-pushing genre texts (and awards and industry approaches) with the necessarily foundational work in genre spaces.

*Genre Worlds* encompasses a vast array of content—genre galaxies might have been a preferable metaphor. The authors assert, however, that they are interested in "keeping alive the spatial metaphors of the term 'world' to talk about places where genre books are written, published, and read, especially given the way that technology has enhanced the international aspects of cultural production" (58). Here their "tripartite focus" (1) on the industrial, social, and textual becomes a useful frame for providing an overview. They also argue that texts—and therefore writing even down to sentence level—are influenced by the layered and

interactive elements of genre worlds. A close reading of Claire G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius* through this lens is expertly wrought. It is an exemplary case study which contributes to the denouement of *Genre Worlds*'s argument regarding the inextricable interconnectivity of genre worlds' participants and systems.

Although I am cognisant of the fact that the authors do not need to balance all three genres perfectly to make their points saliently, I did worry at times about an overreliance or over focus on romance. However, where romance is more strongly featured there is also sound justification which is, itself, part of the genre worlds argument: romance authors are readily organised into conventions and groups in both national and international contexts—where innovation abounds—and romance readership is massive and enduringly faithful. One of the interviewees, Iain Ryan, “acknowledges the leading role played by romance fiction” in the self-publishing space as one example (54). Ryan also expresses the view that those looking into self-publishing will realise that “romance has discovered” core trends or approaches “three or four months ago. Or a year ago” (54). In addition to generic scope, the authors locate themselves well in Australian literary and research contexts without alienating international readers. This neatly exemplifies their own argument that there is a “constant, dynamic interplay between the global and the national” for genre fiction (61). The capacity to bridge spatial divides by digital means is also considered extensively, as are the limitations of these means. London, New York, Sydney—and at one point Melbourne—are acknowledged as hubs of literary activity which retain geographical privileges despite the advancement of technology blurring border boundaries.

While there is a lot that this work does exceedingly well, there are some gaps. For instance, the authors identify the work as having an autotheoretical approach early. The scholars introduce the concept of “aca-fans” (fans who are also academics) and identify themselves as fitting this description to varying degrees and belonging to varied genre worlds. They assert: “[O]ur research has sought to leverage the opportunities that arise from traffic between the professional world of academia and genre worlds” (19). However, while this is true of the research in this book broadly, and the “aca fan” is mentioned at various other points in *Genre Worlds*, the personal and autotheoretical is often implicit rather than explicit. There are various considerations which may have limited their capacity or willingness to fully embrace an autotheoretical approach. Autotheory is still sometimes contested or questioned (perhaps why the authors admit to having “sometimes unconventional” methods in the introduction (2)) and the author's themselves note that within genre communities, aca-fans who adopt the position “from the ‘aca’ entrance point may create tension” (21) with other fans or stakeholders. The authors therefore sought to balance “critical distance and personal investment and model a kind of critical proximity” (21). However, I found myself wishing the proximity was more overtly proximate as the moments where it was openly employed (such as Kim Wilkins's description of a writers' convention in Chapter 5) were some of the richest in illustrating genre worlds in action.

The other notable gap is in relation to social media. While Twitter (X), Facebook, Goodreads, blogs, and writing sites such as Wattpad are mentioned, TikTok and Instagram, and more specifically the worlds of BookTok and Bookstagram, are not delved into in detail. These are two spaces in the digital world where genre texts are consumed, shared, and contributed to by fans, authors, and industry professionals alike. There are two main areas where analysis—or at the very least discussion—of the role and influence of these sites would have been useful. The first is in Chapter 3 where algorithms and digital affordances are examined, but not in detailed relation to social media. The second place this would have been useful and expected is in Chapter 5 where “genre sociality online” is taken up as a major focus. As *Genre Worlds* takes the twenty-first century as its focus, the decision to discuss blogs (from the 1990s) in preference to these two prolific and influential sites was a strange one. I imagine

there were limitations brought by interviews, but it is a gap all the same and one I am interested to see filled in relation to the genre worlds concept.

Overall, *Genre Worlds* is a thoughtfully constructed, rich and varied repository with potentially far-reaching applications for (and appeal to) interdisciplinary scholars and readers alike. At the beginning of this review, I mentioned how highly readable this book was. I'd therefore be remiss if I finished without mentioning the snippets of genre writing at the end of each chapter. Like breadcrumbs leading to a house of sweets, they are impossible not to follow hungrily. In a deliciously meta way, these fragments of genre writing cement *Genre Worlds* as a part of the worlds it is constructing.

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