

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Ericka Johnson.** *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian-American Internet Romance.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. 193 pp.p. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4010-2; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4029-4.

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## Russian Dreaming

Erika Johnson's *Dreaming of a Mail Order Husband* provides a textured glimpse into the controversial topic of the U.S.-Russian matchmaking industry. It draws on interviews conducted with women ranging from those who have sought U.S. husbands via these services to those who have married U.S. men and moved to the United States. Johnson conducted these interviews in Russia during the mid-to-late nineties. We learn that the book is the unanticipated outcome of earlier research that investigated the spread of information technology in the former Soviet Union and gendered patterns of Internet access and use. Johnson was drawn to the topic of the matchmaking industry when she discovered matchmaking sites and when she realized that the "cyberspace identity" of different cities "was made up of women who were trying to leave it" (p. 9). Compelled by the brief profiles she encounters on the sites, she finds that the material and the questions it begs will not leave her alone. Johnson clearly seeks to engage us in the way she was engaged-to draw us in to her own process of investigation. We join her in a suspenseful, slightly eerie voyage of discovery as she follows the steps a potential suitor would take-locating her subjects online, purchasing their addresses and, finally, meeting them in person. It is here, however, that her experience departs from that of the potential suitor; her gender, goals, and cultural and linguistic competence enable her to access these women's thoughts, reflections and to learn about the conditions that propel them.

Johnson's goals are both to disrupt the narratives about mail order brides, that have prevailed both in media and policy discussions, and to humanize the women who participate in the industry. As she notes, these women tend to be presented either as victims (the dupes of traffickers) or as gold diggers. Either

way, they are denied agency. The book goes a considerable way toward restoring that agency and humanizing these women. Her goal is to explore the motivations and dreams of her informants and to show what drives and animates them. As a corrective to the industry (which encapsulates individual women and reduces them to the most brief and formulaic of profiles) and to the discourses that purport to represent them, *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband* seeks to give her informants space and to "let them speak." The book's structure echoes this goal; chapters profile Johnson's six subjects and bear their names—Olga, Vera, Valentina, Tanya, Marina, Anastasia. These (sometimes composite) portraits seek to complicate our ideas about the hapless women in this business and advance a sense of the diversity of their experience. Each chapter contains accounts of the backdrop issues that caused this industry to arise (severe economic dislocation, shrinking job market, gender roles and expectations), slowly building up a sense of the context in which these women make their choices.

The portraits she presents certainly achieve her goal of complexifying our ideas about who Russian mail order brides are. Her subjects are relatively diverse in terms of age, marital history and educational background. Contra ideas about isolated, uninformed individuals, we learn about "subcommunities" that form around dating agencies in Russia as women share knowledge and tips about how to proceed. One of her subjects is a matchmaker (also seeking her own husband), who works closely and empathetically with local women to assist them craft successful applications and who keeps her own "catalogue of men" from rejected suitors. Across this diversity however, her subjects are united in expressing one hope and dream: to find love.

Both her contextualizing discussions and personal anecdotes about her own experience of Russia as an exchange student in the mid-nineties provide important information about the political economy and dislocations that structure these desires and yearnings. Indeed, each chapter advances an issue. In “Valentina,” we learn about gender discrimination and women’s experience of the job market during the transition period; in “Tanya,” we learn about gender expectations and the prevalence of domestic violence. As she presents us with her subjects’ narratives, Johnson positions herself as a cultural broker, by explaining and interpreting some of the misperceptions each party has of each other (for example, while both U.S. male suitors and Russian women share disgust at “feminism,” they hold very different constructions of it).

I found these moments of interpretation to be some of the most successful moments in the book. However, some of Johnson’s pivots worked less well and on occasion they seemed only loosely connected to her ethnographic material; that is to say, on oc-

casional there seemed to be only a hypothetical connection between the subject and the issue it causes Johnson to reflect upon. It is not clear, for example, how the account of global feminism and its failings pertains to the experience of Tanya, or indeed any of her informants. This discussion also misses the opportunity to engage the burgeoning scholarship on feminism by feminist scholars in Russia. The discussion of trafficking in this chapter is perhaps the most problematic; it inadvertently reifies the representations the author intends to displace, since it is not based on actual ethnographic material. (While Tanya’s relatives fear she is slipping into the hands of traffickers, this emerges not to be the case.). Ironically, this does injustice to her informants and betrays her intent to let them speak for themselves.

Despite these issues, overall, *Dreaming of a Mail Order Husband* is an engaging, highly readable tour into the lived experience of the so-called transition period of the nineties. As such, it would work well in undergraduate courses on Russian area studies on postsocialism or on gender studies.

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