

Antonia Levi, Mark McHarry, Dru Pagliassotti, eds.. *Boys' Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-Cultural Fandom of the Genre*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2008. viii + 272 pp. \$39.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-4195-2.



Reviewed by Andrea Wood

Published on H-Histsex (August, 2010)

Commissioned by Timothy W. Jones (University of South Wales, & La Trobe University)

Since the early part of the twenty-first century, Japanese *manga* (comics) have risen in prominence and popularity among Western publishing markets. Successful titles often take top positions in *Publishers Weekly* rankings for graphic novels. Even the *New York Times* has added a section for manga in its “Bestsellers” book list. Many manga, especially those that fall in the *shōjo* category targeted toward young girls, are written and illustrated by women. Not surprisingly, Japanese manga have played a pivotal role in successfully attracting girls and women to comics in ways that male-dominated Western comics have not. In recent years, a smaller sub-genre of homoerotic manga known as *yaoi* or boys’ love has found a commercially successful niche market that is continuing to grow. Produced primarily by and for women, boys’ love manga feature stories about romantic and often sexual relationships between beautiful and androgynous male characters. A popular genre of manga in Japan since its beginnings in the 1970s, boys’ love has generated an increasingly global fandom as the rise of digital me-

dia and technology have facilitated the transnational distribution of texts among fans all over the world.

Boys’ Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-Cultural Fandom of the Genre, published by McFarland, is the first collection of essays in English dedicated to exploring the global reaches and implications of boy’s love manga fandom. Divided into three main sections, the book addresses the global publishing markets for boys’ love, the genre and its readership, and boys’ love and the perceptions of the queer. On the whole, *Boys’ Love Manga* takes primarily anthropological and ethnographic approaches toward its subject matter. While this is a fairly conventional methodological practice in fandom studies, it has both strengths and limitations. On a broader level, the collection lacks cohesion and a clear purpose at times. The back cover explains that “this collection of 14 essays addresses boys’ love as it has been received and modified by fans outside Japan as a commodity, controversy, and culture,” but Antonia Levi’s introduction does not provide fur-

ther clarification on the organizing principles or purpose behind the book, as she merely prefaces her summary of the chapters by stating “in this book, scholars from a wide variety of disciplines discuss the topic of boys’ love outside Japan” (p. 5).

The first section, which focuses on the publishing industry, is ultimately more informative than argumentative. One factor that complicates this section, and other parts of the collection, is the tension between contributors’ investments as fans and as scholars of boys’ love. This is further compounded by the fact that a significant number of the contributors are not academics in the conventional sense. For instance, in the first section two essays are by contributors involved in the publishing industry itself—Hope Donovan, a former Tokyopop manga editor, and Yamila Abraham, founder of Yaoi Press. While both authors provide compelling insight into the boys’ love publishing scene outside of Japan and their personal experiences with the commercial production of texts, their essays read more like intellectual journalism than formal academic research and may turn off readers who are looking exclusively for cutting-edge scholarship that engages in the current academic discourses about boys’ love in Japan and other parts of the world. Other contributors include freelance authors, as well as undergraduate and graduate students whose caliber of work varies greatly in terms of theoretical complexity and academic relevance.

A recurring and significant thread throughout the collection is the connection between boys’ love and research on popular romance, and this theme structures much of the second section’s focus on genre and readership. Several scholars make direct reference to Janice Radway’s famous ethnographic study of romance readers (Dru Pagliassotti, M. M. Blair, and Tan Bee Kee) and identify it as influencing their own ethnographic work on boys’ love. The relevance behind drawing parallels between popular romance fiction

and boys’ love manga is made apparent in Pagliassotti’s chapter “Better than Romance?” in which she uses her virtual ethnographic study of fans (employing similar questions to those Radway used) to show critical similarities and surprising differences between readers of popular (heterosexual) romance and boys’ love. Pagliassotti puts her study into conversation with previous research conducted by feminist scholars working on popular romance in the 1980s (Janice Radway, Kay Mussell, and Carol Thurston) and argues that boys’ love manga (which some scholars have tried to distance from popular romance) actually share formulaic and structural tendencies with popular romances—and that readers seem to want these narrative conventions regardless of whether they are reading about a romance between a straight or gay couple. Marni Stanley’s analysis in “101 Uses for Boys” moves in productive directions when she examines notes from the author often included at the end of (or occasionally in the margins) of boys’ love manga. She disagrees with psychoanalytic theorists who have read women’s interest in yaoi and slash as “attempting to compensate for feminine ‘lack’” (p. 99) and instead claims that author notes in boys’ love manga, which often explain authors’ creative processes for developing sex scenes and encourage female readers to imagine transgressive erotic scenarios that are appealing to them, reflect the sexually empowering potential of the genre. Mark John Isola’s “Yaoi or Slash Fiction” begins with a promising critical intervention into the *yaoi ronsō* debates that have “alternated between considering the narratives [yaoi and slash] as acts of appropriation or as locations of hegemonic resistance” (p. 86). Isola aptly demonstrates how this binary has also shaped Western scholarship on yaoi and slash, which often relies on presumed East/West binaries of difference, and points to theoretical overlaps between the work of Eve Sedgwick and Fushimi Noriaki to reveal how heteronormativity “does not solely function with the lived experience or critical purview of the West, and the primacy of the

homo/hetero binary is pervasive in other modern cultures” (p. 91). Unfortunately, Isola loses sight of his argument toward the end as his essay veers off into theoretical abstraction. Tan Bee Kee’s piece on *Weiss Kreuz* slash fanfiction, on the other hand, becomes mired in somewhat reductive understandings of gender and sexuality and outdated research on romance. Indeed, the essay relies heavily on Ann Snitow’s 1979 analysis of mass-market romances to generalize about female dissatisfaction with heterosexual romance narratives and emphasize how yaoi overcomes them. Tan creates an oversimplified dichotomy between heterosexual romance novels as wholly oppressive and yaoi as utopianly transgressive that misses some of the complexity feminist scholars like Radway and Tania Modleski identified in women’s fantasies about and attitudes toward romance.

The final section of the book engages more directly with queerness and boys’ love, picking up on a central focus of current discourse on boys’ love manga among well-known scholars like Mark McLelland and James Welker. For the first time in the collection, there is a direct discussion about the appeal of yaoi for gay men and lesbians in Alan Williams’ “Raping Apollo,” which introduces some interesting ideas but unfortunately lacks a focused argument and makes some problematic connotations between the “feminine” and the “uncritical” (p. 224). Neil K. Akatsuka’s “Uttering the Absurd” complicates the gender dynamics of boys’ love readership as always already presumed to be female and heterosexual and concludes with an engaging if contentious critique of boys’ love as “not queer enough” in that it “queers identity without the anti-homophobic political agenda that queerness usually entails” (p. 172). In “Hidden in Straight Sight,” Uli Meyer covers a lot of provocative ground but in a rather fragmented fashion. Nonetheless, Meyer brings trans discourse into the analysis of yaoi texts and fans, expanding theoretical perspectives on the genre to consider not only the queer sexuality of readers but also the

queer gender of boys’ love fans—the latter of which has been less thoroughly interrogated by scholars. “Queering the Quotidian” is even more meandering but similarly engaging as it moves back and forth between authors Mark Vicars and Kim Senior’s reader-response musings which use “[their] textual lives as a form of landscape from which to elucidate doubled understandings of [their] readerly/writerly relationship with manga and the cultural discourses of gender and sexuality” (p. 191). Alexis Hall presents ethnographic research conducted with twenty-one respondents at the 2006 Yaoi-Con in “Gay or Gei” to support her argument that “American consumers of yaoi bring culturally specific assumptions of sexual identity to the text” (p. 211). Hall suggests that these ethnocentric notions play a key part in Western readers’ constructions of gay identity in their understanding of boys’ love, but she is unable to persuasively explain why reading “realness” in yaoi is relevant to current academic discourses on the genre.

In many respects, one of the most noticeable weaknesses of this collection is its lack of attention to the art form itself. In this sense, *Boys’ Love Manga* will undoubtedly frustrate comics scholars who are interested in how we can read and understand boys’ love manga in cross-cultural, historical, and artistic contexts. For instance, only one essay in the collection references actual comics scholarship by relating Scott McCloud’s notion of the cartoon as an iconic image we can identify with via “amplification through simplification” (Isola, p. 86). Similarly, there is very little engagement with the artistic history and aesthetic traditions of manga—Brigitte Koyama-Richard’s *One Thousand Years of Manga* (c. 2008) being an excellent but ignored resource. Several essays do refer to actual boys’ love texts to make broader claims about the genre, but very few spend time performing substantive analysis of the narratives or specific panels. Notable exceptions are Mark McHarry’s essay “Boys in Love in Boy’s Love,” which uses Keiko Takemiya’s *Song of Wind and*

Trees to theorize the development of a gay identity through an experience of abjection, and Neal K. Akatsuka's "Uttering the Absurd, Revealing the Abject," which discusses several boys' love titles that have been translated and sold in North America to illustrate what he perceives to be the disavowal of homosexuality in boys' love narrative structures.

Boy's Love Manga takes on an overly ambitious project in seeking to analyze a global and somewhat nebulous fandom. As a whole the collection will not satisfy everyone, but most readers—from those with a curious to a professional interest in the genre—will be sure to find something that appeals to them. Ultimately, this collection reflects the still nascent nature of work being done on boys' love manga and fandom outside of Japan, much of which needs more time to develop and mature its overall scholarly sophistication and depth.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex>

Citation: Andrea Wood. Review of Levi, Antonia; McHarry, Mark; Pagliassotti, Dru, eds. *Boys' Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-Cultural Fandom of the Genre*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. August, 2010.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30458>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.