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Christine Grandy : Heroes and happy endings : class, gender, and nation in popular film and fiction in interwar Britain

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## **Heroes and Happy Endings: Class, Gender, and Nation In Popular Film and Fiction In Interwar Britain**

CHRISTINE GRANDY

Manchester, UK & New York, NY, Manchester University Press

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In the wake of renewed attention to the First World War, popular culture is witnessing something of a revival in the interest in the interwar period. This can be seen in the success of recent popular cultural texts focusing on this period, such as Jacqueline Winspear's *A Maisie Dobbs Mystery* novels, revolving around Maisie, a British housemaid turned wartime nurse turned post-First World War private investigator. Similarly, the television series (after the novels of Kerry Greenwood) *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*, an Every Cloud Productions for ABC sold to 120 territories, centres around the personal and professional life of aristocratic 1920s Melbourne girl and former First World War heroine Phryne Fisher. While Phryne is the sexually liberated flapper girl opposite of Maisie Dobbs junior version of Miss Marple, both series portray strong women going about their detective business in storylines determined by the effects of the First World War on people and society and on the social context of the interwar period.

Distinctly twenty-first century in production and several of its characterisations, these series echo the popular cultural texts that are the subject of Christine Grandy's *Heroes and Happy Endings: Class, Gender, and Nation In Popular Film and Fiction In Interwar Britain*. Combining insights from cultural studies, gender studies, cultural history and media and film studies, the book presents a refreshing analysis of – literally the most – popular books and films in Britain in the interwar period. Resolutely and convincingly, Grandy moves away from a focus on elite culture to analyse the key role of popular (mass) culture in articulating and reinforcing social concerns and anxieties in interwar Britain.

She does so by focusing on the portrayal of heroes, villains and love interests, which are explained in the social context of the time and with an eye for the role of censorship institutions in promoting certain interpretations of interwar images over others. So, the books and films' key characters of the hero, the villain and the love interest are not just discussed in their own right but as expressions of and catalysts for social trends, political (lack of) action and all kinds of individual and collective anxieties. Following the focus on popular culture, the emphasis is on the working and middle classes and their evolving position in interwar British society, as the book shows how deeply felt issues regarding the economy and the nation were instrumental in shaping the key characters in the books and films under study.

Chapter one on heroes introduces us to the breadwinner hero and the hero who loves his country. These are not only explained and illustrated with various examples in popular interwar books and films, but explained in the context of the interwar social fabric, confronted with unemployed and disoriented First World War soldiers, looking for place in society and seemingly abandoned by government. Ultimately, Grandy writes: 'Heroes are returned to the collective and fashioned as central to this "empty harmony" necessary for the narrative. What is clear from popular fiction and films is that post-war harmony included a reassertion of the masculine soldier as employed and re-dedicated to broad notions of British nationalism' (p. 40).

Following on from that, in chapter two, Grandy argues that 'the social and economic conditions of Britain following World War I fostered a characterisation of both businessmen and government officials as villains' (p. 84). As a result, many villains are portrayed as wealthy, the result of involvement in war time profiteering which was deeply rejected by interwar British society. Grandy further illustrates how next to (the longer tradition of the) knowable villain, a newer type developed of the unknowable bad guy (and sometimes girl): 'the seemingly ordinary middle-class and unidentifiable villains' (p. 90). Throughout the book, it is made clear that the villain types are not only interesting in their own right but also function as a tool for the hero to establish himself.

This establishing interrelationship between different characters in a book or film further becomes clear from Grandy's discussion of the - female - love interest. If the hero is expected to be the breadwinner, the woman is to forsake wealth and a job for love. In any case, wealth to a woman is

nothing without the love of a man. The heteronormative core of society here becomes intertwined with economic and nationalist issues, as the many examples from interwar books and films popular in Britain illustrate.

The final chapter on censorship by the Home Office and BBFC may come as a bit of a surprise after all the discussion of characters and themes, and it does not reach the depth of analysis found in the chapters discussing the heroes, villains and love relations. Yet, it provides a necessary and thought-provoking background to these chapters, showing how the portrayal of key fictional characters in interwar Britain in part were shaped through the censorship of these two institutions. The objections they raised against certain characters or themes, as studied by Grandy, provides an extra layer of understanding as 'the censorship bodies of the Home Office and the BBFC [...] promoted and produced specific types of heroes, villains, and love interests in order to maintain a particularly gendered capitalist ideology that situated men at the centre of the nation and economy' (p. 180).

Some of the strong points of the book include the thorough and original use of a wide range of source materials. Not just the interwar books and novels and the secondary sources relating to them are being analysed. Grandy draws on a much wider range of documents and other historical sources to paint a complex picture that includes a strong contextualisation in the social realities of the interwar period in Britain – and to a lesser extent the US. It further stands out because it is so well-written, combining more complex conceptual discussions with insightful analyses of actual characterisations in books and films. Moreover, it does so in a way that even those not familiar with the particular books and films will find it accessible, with enough background to 'get the picture' without the information ever becoming redundant. Grandy gets it 'just right'.

The book is certainly fit for students and scholars interested in historical perspectives on the role of popular culture in general and in the interwar period in particular. It is of relevance to people in cultural studies, film studies, cultural histories and media studies but, really, it can be enjoyed by anyone interested in popular culture and/in the interwar period.

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