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Book Review

Love at Last Sight: Dating, Intimacy, and Risk in Turn-of-the-Century Berlin

by Tyler Carrington. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2019. XI+248 pp. \$36.95

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“Jetzt gehe ich allein, durch eine große Stadt,” sings Greta Keller in the 1931 film *Der Mann, der seinen Mörder sucht*, “[u]nd ich weiß nicht, ob sie mich lieb hat”. Falling in love in the big, anonymous city was a popular theme in the 1920s and the 1930s all the way from the contemporaneous American musical to Turkish modernist literature like Sabahattin Ali’s *Kürk Mantolu Madonna*, which takes place in Weimar Berlin. Tyler Carrington has taken a microhistorical path to exploring how intimacy and love were sought and found in late imperial Berlin, focusing on the story of one “poor, single Berlin seamstress” (1) who found the love of her life through an ad in the newspaper only to be found dead a week after meeting him not far from Berlin. Through her carefully excavated life story, the readers are led to the world of the middle classes, for whom opportunities and risks abounded.

The first chapter focuses on the way the modern city challenged middle-class ethos. While the arranged encounter mediated by the parents was still perceived to be the appropriate way for Bürgers to meet their future spouse, the young population of Berlin was increasingly obsessed with fortuitous and improbable encounters. As Carrington demonstrates, newspapers preferred to print articles and stories about loneliness that gave the impression of diminishing prospects for marriage (despite the stable marriage rate) and the way these prospects were redeemed by such *Strassenbekanntschaften*. The idea of replacing the arranged custom of the older generation with spontaneity allured the youth even in its most technical form, a machine that offered “a reproduction of a randomly selected negative” for a penny, which bars and restaurants placed to show people “a photo of their future mate” (26). This was further complicated by the fact that Berliners linked their idea of

their opportunities for finding a marriage partner with their idea of the city. For some, it was exactly the enthralling fluidity of the new metropolis that allowed love to come from unexpected avenues; others reported that leaving Berlin was the only way to one's wedding night.

But Berlin offered more options for finding a mate than the simple and overly-idealistic dichotomy of an arranged meeting in the living room and stumbling upon a husband on a streetcar. Almost every social occasion became a romantic hunting field: workplaces, apartment buildings, cafeterias, evening balls, dancing clubs, and even hobbies. As a cartoon from 1900 suggested, "hearts find each other more easily" (58) when playing tennis. All these encounters in search for love allowed, at least in the imagination of the Berliners, much more room for casual dating or casual relationships, encapsulated in the German term *Verhältnis*. Such fleeting relationships were basically a gay person's only choice in a country that criminalized homosexual sex – and for Carrington, the story of Berlin's non-heterosexuals is interwoven within that of other loves in the metropolis instead of artificially bifurcated.

Many young men and women, it was reported, found it difficult to turn any of these *Verhältnisse* into a lasting marriage. The "problem of marriage in turn-of-the-century Berlin" (80) is the subject of the third chapter. Others reacted with distaste to the option of fleeting relationships. The "modern woman", somewhat of a fiction debated over the pages of the press, was provocatively – and electively – single. The period of youth, or singlehood, was marked by increased freedom: A woman could choose her job and move between workplaces just as she could do with men. Men, too, were seen as averse to marriage – due to career prospects, feelings of entrapment, or the wish to marry a woman with money. Thus, if not averse, many Berliners were willing to wait while engaging in premarital forms of intimacy. As an institution, marriage itself was subject for much criticism and ambitious

reform plans.

New technologies stood at the disposal of those who were still intently looking for a relationship intently. Personal ads in newspapers sometimes included as few details as “Senior teacher, Dr., widower, no children, 51 yrs., looking for spouse” (103), a particular phrasing used by a criminal to rob women. This was by no means the final attempt of the utterly desperate, as “nearly every Berliner knew someone who had used or was using the newspaper to find love or marriage” (119). But swindlers abounded. When they were not replying to ads, they were using the new matchmaking services that were held to be suspicious enterprises prone to prostitution or monkey business by the Berlin police. The growing popularity of matchmaking bureaus, which Carrington bounds to the fascination of the population with the fortuitous encounter, eventually led to their regulation. Socially, they too stood in the center of arguments about class dignity in light of immensely burdensome loneliness, and about this new type of arranged marriage versus love marriage. Indeed, the very act of writing an ad involved selecting what to put in and what to leave out, not least including “a cryptic statement about wealth” and “the corresponding qualities of the desired mate” (133). By submitting the ad, the sender has virtually acknowledged that love might not have been made in heaven and compromised some of his middle-class honor. For the non-heterosexuals, using such new technologies required exposing oneself to even harsher risks, the worse of which was perhaps criminal persecution. Thus, as Carrington demonstrates, modern love was contested not only in public – the people of Berlin often had to justify their own decisions to pursue such mediatory means of finding partners.

The case of Frieda Kliem, the poor seamstress, is the running thread of this magnificently written story of Berlin. In the trial of her alleged murderer, the jury discovered that it was entirely possible that “everyone [had] a hidden identity” (167), that urban life was a collection of masked individuals who could present themselves in new masks as needed.

While apartment buildings and dance clubs allowed the metropolis to shrink back from its anonymity-imposing monstrous proportions into discreet areas where people knew each other, personal ads were effectively a recognition of modern life as composed of masks, as Carrington effectively argues. This issue, along with a host of others ranging from respectability to individualism – were put on trial alongside Kliem’s murderer. This “triangular relationship between marriage, the middle class, and the turn-of-the-century individual” could alternatively be described with marriage being the equilibrium that allowed one to “establish themselves in the modern world” (172-73). The transition to adulthood in turn-of-the-century Berlin, then, involved channeling one’s youthful individualism into realizing “the dream of middle-class life” (173) by way of marriage. In the modernist age, this conceptually involved “the transition from stable land to shoreless future” (172).

Love at Last Sight is a convincing, richly narrated, and analytically sound study of the opportunities and risks that modern civilization offered to the young. It will likely become a classical work for people interested in everyday life in the fin-de-siècle and can easily be used for teaching both undergraduate and graduate students. The balance it strikes between Kliem’s story and the wider picture reconstructed through a variety of sources (but mainly newspapers and fiction) is admirable and accommodates a wide range of readers without getting lost in the particularity of his micro-history.