

**Frye, Northrop. *Northrop Frye's Notebooks on Romance*. Ed. Michael Dolzani. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004. Vol. 15 of *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*. Alvin A. Lee, gen. ed. 27 vols to date. 1996 - . 560 pp. \$106.00**

**Review by Jonathan Allan**

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Northrop Frye (1912-1991) remains one of the most cited and broadly useful theorists of the romance as a literary genre, not only in its form as an amorous novel but also in the tradition of the adventure story, historical novel, science fiction, and so on. Frye's major works on genre—*Anatomy of Criticism* and *The Secular Scripture*—are, of course, well-known; however, it is in Frye's notebooks that readers find a literary critic struggling—as many of us do—to define the essence of the romance and its place in literary study.

In *The Secular Scripture*, Frye writes: “popular literature is neither better nor worse than elite literature, nor is it really a different kind of literature” (*CW* XVIII:23). For Frye, as his notebooks often attest, the nature of the ‘popular’ was an enduring concern. In his *Notebooks on Romance*, Frye writes (at some point between 1972-1977):

[T]he identification with the hero, or with the society portrayed in a soap opera as followed by housewives in a Newfoundland port, brings up the whole question of how far popular literature is popular because it outlines the kind of lives people live within. Shopgirl romance does outline and enclose the sensibility of a lot of shopgirls; detective stories enclose the sense of mystery behind familiar buildings. This is an aspect of the ‘popular’ I need to think about. (270-1)

Frye's notes are filled with these *notes-to-self*: examples of how his mind was working to understand the romance, and also anticipations of how criticisms of his account of romance might unfold. Again and again, Frye wrestles with the role of the popular and popularity in the study of literature—the study, that is, as opposed to the evaluation of

texts. For Frye, the place of value judgments in literary study is best left with the book review editor of a newspaper than it is with an academic deciding which works are “valuable” enough for academic study.

In his notebooks, as in his published work, Frye has a still-remarkable ability to recognize difference without allowing difference to become a measure of judgment and value. Thus, for example, Frye speaks about the various forms of romance ranging from the love story through to the adventure story, historical novel, and science fiction, neither ranking these subgenres nor lumping them together in an undifferentiated mass. It is a pleasure to see Frye, the literary critic par excellence, finding comfort and intellectual delight in the realm of the public and popular. For instance, Frye writes, “[t]his night side of the map runs out in Rider Haggard—with jet planes it’s no use talking about mysterious cities buried in Africa—you have to go to outer space” (201). Here Frye notes the ways in which romance (broadly construed) modernizes throughout its history, which, of course, finds its way into major statements on genre. Frye has no worries, it would seem, about drawing on ‘high’ or ‘low’ literature and feels comfortable writing on either or both in conjunction with one another.

In the volume, Frye provides one of the strongest defenses of romance. While preparing the lectures that would become *The Secular Scripture*, he writes: “[m]y thesis is, of course, that romance illustrates structure and realism only content, hence a genuinely literary history would put the romancers in the centre and make realism peripheral” (202). Romance thus becomes, as Frye would later write in *The Secular Scripture*, “the structural core of all fiction” (*CW* XVIII:14). Behind such statements, we can now see, lies a critical vision which effortlessly integrates literary history, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and religious and literary texts. Indeed, Frye’s vision of romance articulates his own optimistic, even utopian spirit. “Romance and fantasy,” he observes, “are inevitably for writers who don’t believe in the permanence of their own society” (257).

Finally, a brief comment ought to be included here about the continued labors of the *Collected Works of Northrop Frye* project. Editor Michael Dolzani’s introduction to *Northrop Frye’s Notebooks on Romance* is a superb resource for understanding Frye’s theoretical work, and Dolzani’s expert annotation of Frye’s notes offers readers nearly a hundred pages explaining anything ranging from the book Frye is quoting to terms used by the critic. Bringing Frye’s work to the attention of a new generation of romance scholars, *Northrop Frye’s Notebooks on Romance* is an essential volume for future work on the genre.

## Works Cited

Frye, Northrop. *The Secular Scripture and Other Writings on Critical Theory, 1976-1991*. Eds. Joseph Adamson and Jean Wilson. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006. Vol. 18 of *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*. Alvin A. Lee, gen. ed. 27 vols to date. 1996 – .