

Book Reviews

Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 10(1), 2018, pp 315-319
ISSN 1718-9748 © University of Alberta
<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index/php/cjfy>

Azoulay, Dan. (2011). Hearts and Minds: Canadian Romance at the Dawn of the Modern Era, 1900 - 1930. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.

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In “Hearts and Minds,” Dan Azoulay explores heterosexual Canadian romance in the beginning of the 20th century by detailing prevailing attitudes about ideal partners, the rules of courtship and its difficulties, as well as how romance changed due to WWI. To achieve his goal, Azoulay read over 20,000 letters from “correspondence columns” in the *Family Herald and Weekly Star*, whose circulation was over 200,000 by 1930, and *Western Home Monthly*, whose circulation was approximately 100,000 by 1930 (p. 240). For the rules of romance, Azoulay supplements correspondence letters with excerpts from etiquette columns and books, and uses letters and diaries to make up for the waning responses to the columns during WWI. The book is focused on courtship and romance, rather than weddings and marriage, with emphasis on 1904 - 1920, as that is when the columns were the most popular. Unlike previous research into the area, Azoulay’s research focuses on working class citizens, rather than elites, and since his primary sources were targeted at that demographic (p. 3).

Azoulay begins by distilling the qualities most often sought out by letter writers, in order to summarize the “ideal man and woman” of the era. Azoulay recognizes, by quoting a female letter writer, that some men had an unattainable catalogue of traits they desired in a wife, but most were realistic (p. 22). The traits Azoulay found most often repeated are summarized from chapter two as follows: She must possess excellent domestic skills and be willing and able to work hard in the home, as well as on the farm if needed. She is intelligent and cultured enough to

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be an interesting conversationalist and entertaining musician, but she must not be a suffragette, a business woman, nor a flirt. She needs to be clean and well-kempt, with up-to-date clothing, but not fall victim to the expensive and silly fashions of the day. Above all, she must be feminine and Christian, which means being kind, modest, reserved, polite, and grateful for her place in life.

As for the women's "ideal man," Azoulay notes that women were far less likely to advocate for certain qualities, proposing that their hesitation was due to the "mindset of the age" that a women "could basically *create* her ideal man once married" (p. 53). Since women were not as open with their desires, Azoulay relies on what few women outright requested, as well as the reassurances of bachelors of what they were not, in order to construct the "ideal man" of the era, which is summarized from chapter three as follows: He is willing and able to work hard, is not a lazy Englishman living on an allowance, does not expect his wife to be a slave, is kind and gentlemanly, does not smoke or drink, and is clean, well-groomed, and well dressed.

Throughout the book, Azoulay notes the difficulties Canadians of the era experienced when it came to romance; not only were the men out West isolated, often shy, and hardly in contact with the opposite sex, the general rules of romance of the era made it difficult for men from all regions to express their interest in a woman, and prohibited women from making more than a slight indication of their interest in a man. Azoulay notes that while "most young people accepted the courtship process without complaint," by 1910 many letter writers were expressing attitudes that suggested a change to "a more casual, less rule-bound, less structured stage;" an attitude that, after the war, became a majority opinion amongst letter writers (p. 163).

The war, while inspiring a sense of duty for most Canadians, also provided a means for unconventional approaches to romance; convalescing soldiers were able to meet nurses, as well

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as local women while on leave (p. 191). Men overseas became used to the relaxed rules between opposite sex interactions, both romantic and otherwise; Azoulay credits the war with “damag[ing] Canadians’ faith in the old order,” and facilitating the relative ease of acceptance of dating and the modern woman thereafter (p. 214).

Azoulay presents the attitudes he distilled as that of the average Canadian, as the two magazines were widely read, and the letters represented Canadians from all regions “in proportion to their population;” however, as he quickly adds, “the match is not exact” (p. 11). From the chart Azoulay provides in the footnotes, fifty-three percent of the letters from the *Family Herald* came from the prairies, over twice that of the twenty-three percent population for the area, while in the *Western Home Monthly* it was eighty-one percent (p. 240). A paragraph later he states that “rural Canadians ... were probably over-represented” and that “the columns represented mostly the view of Anglophones,” which is contradictory to the author’s statement that the letters “accurately reflect a cross-section of Canadian society at the time” (p. 11-12). He further qualifies his statement, saying that the West was populated by transplants from other regions, so “it would be wrong ... to exaggerate the regional differences” (p. 11). In another example, Azoulay writes that he “can offer no definite answer” to the question of there being “a *typical* bachelor,” but later offers a definitive answer, declaring that “there *was* a typical bachelor” (pp. 49, 52). This format and style is repeated throughout the book, and is often frustrating to read.

Another problem is that Azoulay very rarely provide actual statistics for his insights. The reader is given general statements about “several,” “many,” or “some” letter writers, without an indication as to the percentage. It would be interesting to see, for example, just how many letter

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writers agreed on the specific traits of the ideal partners that Azoulay presents, and would provide stronger evidence for Azoulay's findings.

Additionally, the language Azoulay uses to describe men lacks the judgement with which he describes similar actions of women; at one point Azoulay describes women who wrote in "seeking merely pen pals, or information about a particular region, or to simply 'cheer up' lonely bachelors" as being "disingenuous;" even describing one woman as "flaunting" when she wrote of her positive qualities while assuring column readers that she was not soliciting a husband (p. 154-153); however he said that men who "used the columns to advertise for a 'housekeeper,'" when they were actually looking for a wife, were just "bashful western bachelors, too embarrassed to openly solicit wives" (p. 141). When men did act in distasteful ways, such as misrepresenting themselves or their situations, Azoulay attributes those lies to a hardship of romance, without reprimanding, or even commenting on the character and intentions of such men (p. 161). The language describing women improves, however, through the chapters on the war and its effects, perhaps due to the more personal nature of the source material; women are more likely to express their thoughts and feelings in a private letter, rather than in the public columns of a magazine, leaving a clearer picture of their motivations.

Azoulay's purpose for the book is to fill in "historiographic gaps" in the knowledge of romance of the era, as most research into romance and courtship focuses on the interactions of the elite class, due to the availability of letters from that far more literate class (p. 9). Azoulay's selection of quotes are excellent; however, at times the analysis is lacking, and more numerical data would provide stronger support for the attitudes presented. I believe the book would be interesting to historians interested in the working class of the era, as well as those researching the personal repercussions of WWI. Furthermore, it could be especially useful to sociologists who

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are interested in studying the differences between early “modern” romance and our romantic patterns today, particularly the similarities between these “correspondence” letters and online dating.