

BOOK REVIEW

DREAMING OF A MAIL-ORDER HUSBAND: RUSSIAN-AMERICAN INTERNET ROMANCE. Written by Ericka Johnson, Duke University Press, 2007.

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Dreaming of a Mail-order Husband is, to my knowledge, the first book-length qualitative study of Russian-American internet romance. This timely account does a good deal to humanize so-called “Russian mail-order brides,” who are so frequently depicted – usually as desperate victims of poverty or abuse – in the mass media yet seldom treated as agents with meaningful reasons for pursuing romance abroad.

To redress this problem, Johnson conducted interviews with fourteen Russian women involved in correspondence with American men, as well as a few women who had already migrated to the United States to marry. (American men make brief appearances: through the letters they have written to Johnson’s Russian informants; through comments they have made on online discussion boards; and in a few interviews Johnson conducted with Russian-American couples in the U.S.) Six of the women’s stories are told here. Johnson explains that the selected cases demonstrate some of the diversity of Russian women’s motivations for leaving Russia through marriage, while also reflecting the common refrains she heard again and again: encounters with joblessness, sexual harassment, Russian men’s alcoholism, and Russian men’s reluctance to marry women older than in their 20s or to provide materially for children and families.

In each chapter, the women’s words are interwoven with Johnson’s reflections as she explains her own process of sense-making. For example, in one passage, Johnson examines why her own feminist concerns about international romance did not seem to worry the women she interviewed:

It also struck me as a little problematic that the method these women were using to try to take control of their future involved binding their destiny to another person, to a husband, yet none of them mentioned the lack of control and self-determination such a relationship could potentially involve. To them, a discussion about the power

aspects of a traditional marriage structure seemed to be unnecessary, again generally associated with Western feminism. But seen from their perspective, they had a point. The potential influence one man could have on one’s life and future could seem trivial compared to the overbearing dictates that the social structures of the former Soviet Union currently have on their lives. (38)

Johnson often explains her personal opinions and initial perceptions and then goes on to complicate them by presenting and contextualizing her interlocutors’ views – without necessarily offering a decisive, black-or-white statement about how things “really” are. This approach gives the reader a present sense of both researcher and subjects as agentive participants in a discussion, addressing questions that have no easy answers.

At the same time, this rhetorical style can be somewhat problematic, insofar as important ambiguities and revelations mentioned along the way are often under-highlighted. Early in the book, Johnson explains some of her gut reactions to Russian-American internet correspondence: “I had a faint suspicion that I was seeing the public face of a shadow industry for trafficking women...And...there was little doubt I had come across a forum for an awful lot of not-so-very-enlightened, or not even socially competent, Western men who were keen on importing these women” (12). Ultimately, she explains that she did not see signs of involvement by these particular women in any trafficking networks, and she questions the equation of internet matchmaking with trafficking; but since the argument is not pointed enough to resituate her initial statements effectively, less careful readers could come away with some of the initial assumptions still in place. Likewise, though she notices that the few men she has met appear to be sincerely concerned about issues such as helping their wives overcome culture shock in the U.S., the rather one-dimensional view of American men offered in the book’s opening pages is only gently

problematized. In addition, given that Johnson is concerned to highlight the agency and diversity among Russian women seeking American husbands, it is surprising that she retains the term “mail-order” throughout the book. Because it likens international marriage to a crudely commercial kind of transaction and presents the commodification of women as the singular “truth” of what is going on, many women and men involved in international dating understandably find the term offensive.

Despite these limitations, a few key take-away points emerge clearly in the book’s conclusion: that while global inequalities and gender hierarchies structure what happens in international internet romance, people are indeed searching for love; and that both men and women who enter these relationships are “consenting adults” who actively seek marriages based upon differentiated gender roles.

On the whole, *Dreaming of a Mail-order Husband* is a readable, often absorbing account that illustrates some of the problems that face Russian women today. Johnson’s narration of her conversations with prospective Russian “brides” is rich with the details of daily urban life, from tea drinking to ramshackle apartment landings. Each chapter is centered on an individual woman or couple, peppered as necessary with useful historical and sociological background information. For these reasons, the book could make a reasonable addition to undergraduate courses on Russian or postsocialist area studies, globalization, or gender studies.