

Reviews

Mary Climbs In: The Journeys of Bruce Springsteen's Women Fans, written by Lorraine Mangione and Donna Luff (Rutgers University Press, 2023, 252 pages).

Recently, my favorite television show, *CBS Sunday Morning*, featured a story about fandom and psychological research that tries to explain it. The tone of the piece, even among the scholars who study this topic, was mostly dismissive and eye-rolling. The host and guests chuckled at the thought that hardcore fans feel in relationship with the objects of their adoration. As one of those hardcore fans, I felt frustrated by the lack of nuanced conversation about what it means to focus devotion on celebrities, and musicians, in particular. There are many types of fandoms, of course. But because music is so personal and so emotionally and nostalgically affecting, it creates an unusually potent connection between the artist and their fans. Rather than dismissing this resonance as silly, I think the problem is that our language is limited when it comes to the various forms of relationship. For the most part, we only have words to describe the connection between friends, family, coworkers, or lovers—in other words, people you can call or email because you have their contact information.

What about this connection that arises via the bridge of music—a third thing, in and of itself? Music creates a bond that fans obviously feel, and that artists, including Bruce, often reference as real and significant. I think this is still a relationship (even though Bruce has yet to give me his cell number). And it is nothing to roll your eyes at.

Mary Climbs In: The Journeys of Bruce Springsteen's Women Fans, by Lorraine Mangione and Donna Luff, is a loving attempt to understand this

relationship (although some of the fans they quote deny this connection is “real”). As fans themselves, Mangione and Luff are interested in, “What being a Springsteen fan means for women and what impacts it has on their lives” (5). The authors argue that this is an important missing component in our understanding of Bruce’s decades-long fans. Indeed, it may be hard to find another artist that is more associated with the masculine ideal, male fans, and what is sometimes referred to as “dad rock,” than Bruce. Women, though, make up a significant portion of his dedicated fanbase. As social scientists, Mangione and Luff conducted two surveys of women to explore their perspectives on things like their initial discovery of Bruce, how his music serves as therapy, whether his portrayal of women characters is sexist, and more. Approximately two thousand respondents were recruited through personal networks and *Backstreets.com*.

Mary Climbs In is an important addition to our understanding of Bruce’s cultural impact and relevance, and it helps to peel back the invisibility – or outright dismissal – that so often obscures our perception of women’s roles in music and culture. As Mangione and Luff point out, “Fandom for women has traditionally been thought to relate heavily to sexual and romantic fantasies toward the rock star, though some feminist writers have argued for a variety of motivations in women’s fandom” (12). The authors dig deep to reveal the multifaceted, complex, and even contradictory, motivations and feelings that Bruce’s women fans bring to their devotion. Their work urges us to take seriously the contributions of Bruce’s many women fans and how they have co-created the vibrant audience community that has sustained his career for half a century.

One of the most interesting questions explored in Mangione’s and Luff’s surveys is how women perceive Bruce’s drawing of female characters. He has been criticized for singing about women as little girls in

the early part of his career. He's also been challenged for centering men in most of his songs. Respondents, though, tend to see the complexity in Bruce's characterizations, and they often take into account what they know of his personal relationships with his wife and mother, and his seemingly attentive, loving parenting of his children. One fan notes, "These relationships have definitely helped him understand women and respect them" (51). Explorations like this are a welcome contribution to our understanding of this towering musical icon.

There are some weaknesses in the book. While *Mary Climbs In* seeks to understand what is particular about women's fandom, it fails to offer any point of comparison with Bruce's male fandom to get at that particularity. Gender is a socially constructed spectrum, with femininity at one end and masculinity at the other. These two end points can only be understood in conversation. Without some discussion of what we know about his male fans — what is particular about how men relate to Bruce and his music — we can't know that what his female fans express is "the particular and relational nature of fandom for women" (6). For instance, Mangione and Luff demonstrate that "many women fans...found solace or companionship in Springsteen's work..." (120). I'm sure, however, that many men would say the same. Likewise, the authors discuss how women fans first connected with Bruce's music, "For some the hook came from a single song...Sometimes one finds oneself in a song...Major moments in life, family relationships, and a song can coincide....[M]any women specifically stated that live shows were the experiences that cemented their identity as fans" (30-31). All of this is true, but I'm not sure how it's particular to women. Given this lack of comparative analysis, much of the book reads as description.

There are two other ways in which the book can be improved. Organizationally, the authors jump back and forth between topics. For example, the question of the relationship between Bruce and his fans is covered at least twice (in chapters 2 and 4). Also, I see a missed opportunity to discuss the generational context of this fandom in greater depth. Mangione and Luff do touch on the fact that some fans have been listening to Bruce for fifty years, while others were not even born until decades after *Born to Run* or *Born in the USA* hit the scene. I wonder, though, if it would have made an interesting narrative to organize at least part of the book around these generational waves. In fact, the authors note “the significance and consequence of what was happening in the culture as people grew up...Springsteen’s music was part of the culture and many fans’ lives as they negotiated adulthood” (23). That means that someone discovering his music in 1978 will have a different experience than someone who became a fan in 2005 or 2015. The book could benefit from teasing out these generational nuances to a greater degree.

Overall, *Mary Climbs In* is a welcome contribution to the literature, both for expanding our understanding of this significant and committed fanbase – which, in turn provides greater illumination of Bruce’s place on the American and global stage – and for challenging the idea that women need not be taken seriously as consumers and drivers of musical culture.

Carrie Pitzulo

Renegades: Born in the USA, written by Barack Obama and Bruce Springsteen (Crown, 2021, 303 pages).

They might seem like strange dialogue partners – the former two-term President of the United States and the dynamic American rock music star. But during the summer of 2020, Barack Obama and Bruce Springsteen got together for a long discussion. Their conversation is recorded in this coffee table-style book, complete with photographs of the two speakers, their families, friends, and comrades; words from their songs and speeches; and hand-scrawled notes.

Despite their different walks in life and their very different paths to success and fame, Obama and Springsteen appear to have much in common. Neither man was born to success. Obama was born in Hawaii in 1961 to a White mother; his Black father left the family for a scholarship at Harvard University, then moved to his native Kenya, established another family there, and remained absent from his son's life. Obama's mother, however, had a very positive influence in his life: "She infused me with a basic sense of who I was and why I was blessed to have this beautiful brown skin and to be part of this grand tradition" (31). Springsteen was born twelve years earlier into and grew up in a working-class New Jersey family. He claimed that he never really knew his father: "He was simply an unknowable man with a great penchant for secrecy" (194).

Obama and Springsteen see themselves as part of a great American story: being born into very modest conditions but becoming world-famous after excelling in their life work. Springsteen began playing the guitar at a young age. He states, "When I hold a guitar, I don't feel like I'm holding anything. It's just a part of my body, you know? It's just another appendage. When I strap it on, it feels like my natural state" (83). By the

time he was a young adult, he was playing in a rock band in New Jersey bars, college dances, and other venues, making a living but not accumulating great wealth.

Obama's path was more traditional, though not typical for a Black kid raised by a single parent: Columbia University, Harvard Law School, and then a move into the political world. He served in the Illinois State Senate from 1997-2004 and in the United States Senate from 2005-2008. At age 47, in 2008, he was elected President of the United States.

Both men spoke about the great influence of a romantic partner. For Obama, it is his wife Michelle, always by his side, encouraging his professional and political endeavors. They met when both were young attorneys working and living in Illinois. Shortly after Obama met Michelle, he said to himself, "This is somebody I could see spending my life with" (221). Both wanted careers and a family, and they mutually and affectionately worked to make that goal possible.

We learn about the development of their relationship, which was born from their mutual appreciation of popular culture. Obama and Springsteen had opportunities to mutually celebrate their successes. While he lived in the White House, Obama often staged musical nights--an evening of Motown music, Broadway hits, Latina music. Rock and folk stars like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Smokey Robinson, Stevie Wonder, Mick Jagger, and Cheryl Crow performed in the Obama White House. Springsteen got the chance to perform before President Obama and his family at the White House. The rock star and the president enjoyed each other's company.

Their discussion in *Renegades* goes beyond their personal lives. Political issues, economic issues, racial issues entered their conversation. Springsteen discusses his *Nebraska* album, which explored the nation's

middle-class slippage. He feels guilty when he begins to earn good money and buys a nice home. His hit song "Born in the U.S.A." highlighted the economic issues facing many Americans. During his first presidential run, Obama discussed middle-class decline during the presidencies of his immediate predecessors, Republican Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. This economic decline among the American working class became a key campaign issue for Obama.

Both men speak frankly of the racial issues and changes that occurred during their lifetimes. Springsteen usually played in racially integrated bands. His famous saxophonist, Clarence Clemons, a Black musician, joined Springsteen's band early on and played with him until Clemons's death in 2011. Obama broke the most fortified racial barrier when he was elected President of the United States in 2008.

Springsteen and Obama discuss at length the racial issues and dynamics that they faced growing up and in adulthood in the post-World War II United States. Springsteen calls upon Americans to deal patriotically with our racial and political issues: "politically connecting across party lines; rediscovering common experiences, the love of country, a new national identity that includes a multicultural picture of the United States that's real today, rooted in common ideals and just seeing each other as American again, whether it's blue, red, Black, white" (265).

This dialogue introduces these two noteworthy Americans in an interesting and provocative way. Readers will learn about their lives, their work, and their beliefs. Their dialogue goes far beyond an encyclopedia description or a biographical summary. Readers get a sense of their personalities and their values.

The dialogue ends with kind words exchanged by these two contemporary American giants:

President Obama: I think we've done some good work today, brother.

Bruce Springsteen: We did, yeah. Thank you, brother.

President Obama: I learned something.

Bruce Springsteen: So did I.

The readers of *Renegades Born in the USA* will learn something—about these two formidable men and their culture. Their extended dialogue gives readers insights into their lives and their time.

James Tackach

Because the Boss Belongs to Us, hosted by Jesse Lawson and Holly Casio (iHeart Podcasts, 2024, 7 episodes).

I love straight trash, artsy or not, smart or not, especially from the 1990s. I too am burdened and blessed with sometimes-life-sustaining queer connections to straight icons, though mine tend to skew Quebecois: Celine Dion and Leonard Cohen. What resonates with the podcast hosts in Bruce Springsteen's lyrics and cachet—his 'uncool' locale, working-class consciousness, maybe-camp masculinity—resonates with me as well. Yet, when I turned on the podcast, I couldn't say I had a strong attachment to Bruce. And I still don't. Though, as I'll suggest below, that matters little.

The podcast is led by two hosts, Jesse Lawson and Holly Casio, who guide seven episodes, each focusing on a key factor that may or may not qualify Springsteen as a queer icon: his campiness, his underdog status, his sense of masculine failure set against his vast commercial success, and the likelihood of queers crying, dancing, or "fucking" to his music. The hosts employ a motif of "science," claiming they are testing their fandom hypotheses by gathering evidence from a bevy of experts. In all, this podcast is an interdisciplinary tour de force that models the best of infotainment: scholarship, dialogue, curiosity, playfulness, and gravity, all at once.

The hosts and their many, many guests across disparate fields— from a lesbian fashion historian to a friend's elderly straight father who has seen Springsteen live eighty times—were personable, intelligent, sensitive, genuinely humorous, personally invested, and earnest. In short, it was fun hanging out with this crew.

Much of today's mainstream queer cultural production still centers on the relational modes and histories of cis gay men (consider, for instance,

that cross-identity 'queer icon' status tends to adhere almost exclusively to straight women via reverence by gay men), while this podcast demonstrates the potentials and pleasures of an alternative. One such pleasure was the lineup's focus on what the hosts call the trans-guy/dyke nexus—the shared histories and collaborations of trans guys and women-loving-women that no longer seem as popular a mode of queer affiliation.

The memories of the hosts and many guests of growing up queer in the 80s and 90s in rural spheres reminded me of how important just one lyrical line could be before the internet: the hosts rightly seize on Springsteen's "I wanna change my clothes, my hair, my face!" as one of his many echoes of concurrent queer self-doubt and urgent self-transformation. There is enjoyable nostalgia and a sense of grief that runs through the podcast and its listener (well, this listener) too, from the recurring theme of Springsteen-as-source-of-closeted-queer-catharsis to the recurring setting of the historical-gay-bar-as-vital-community-center, where one may meet a long-time lover or best friend or a super-significant relationship that lasted just half a song (during which you did indeed dance in the dark).

Straight cisgender masculinities are not the 'real' or original things that lesbian, trans, or dyke masculinities then copy; as Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam, and many others have pointed out, straight cis dudes are at least as derivative as the rest of us—Springsteen's stylistic resemblance to (or is it citation of?) early kd lang being one example the hosts offer. Queer fandom can be a source of pleasure, politics, connection, community, and intellectual work, no less a matter of devotion, narrative, projection, and hope creation than, say, sports fandom or expert-music-bro fandom. As much as queer fans find and/or create queer content in straight artists, so too can our fandom of these artists serve as a way for us to learn about how

to live in a straight world (Springsteen as gentle-pedagogue-of-heterosexuality?).

“Masculinities” are contextual, plural, and certainly not homogenous; as one guest states, masculinity feels and signifies differently for those upon whom it is forced, admired, and praised versus those for whom it is forbidden, shamed, and punished. Ultimately, in the podcast’s last episode, a tough panel of expert judges decides whether or not the hosts have made their case convincingly (a skewering of academic peer-review conventions that I quite enjoyed), and the outcome can be best summed up by a panelist who concludes that fandom is a matter of faith, not facts – of fan relationality, not rationality – a conclusion with which this reviewer agrees heartily.

There was an intermittent suggestion (largely by guests) that queers these days may no longer need ‘straight’ icons, now that more celebrities are ‘out,’ to which I ask: 1) Are queers necessarily better equipped to be queerly iconic (I’ll take Celine Dion over Lady Gaga all day), and 2) Isn’t the cross-identity naming and claiming a crucial part of the queer pleasure and process? Queer covers of Springsteen seemed a conspicuous absence, but that may just reflect my membership in the cult dyke/post-dyke following of queer Canadian duo Tegan and Sara’s live rendition of “Dancing in the Dark.” The less compelling portions of the podcast occur when the hosts slide from considering Bruce-as-persona to Bruce-as-person, which may have lightly undermined the broader enterprise of taking the relational art of personae and fandom seriously as visceral realities in their own right.

Relatedly, when we entered those moments of “But what about the real Bruce?” I felt nuance slip away; I sensed the hosts imagined queer Springsteen fans as necessarily different (maybe even ‘better’?) than other

Springsteen fans; I wondered if the arguments about Bruce bringing together disparate demographics or representing working-class culture were somewhat uncut by what I heard, at times, as moralizing. I would want to call in the historians to respond to the repeated claim that women-driven subversions of masculinity are “newer” or “more recent” than men-driven parodies of femininity (though I certainly take the point that the latter have been far more recognized and valued). Since one of the podcast’s high points comes when the hosts and a couple of musician guests debate if Springsteen’s music makes for a good sexual soundtrack (“Can you fuck to it?”), I would have loved more sexuality context and content (“Hey little girl, is your daddy home?” didn’t launch an ‘Is Bruce daddy?’ episode?!), though I note approvingly the central role afforded to Springsteen’s posterior throughout.

Make no mistake: *this is a very positive review*. As many voices mention on the podcast, we offer critical feedback on things we love, and I’d add, on things that offer enough food for thought that we’re whetted. Students in communications, music, popular culture, queer theory, transgender studies, and queer history should listen to this, and it could easily be made part of many cool assignments. Scholars of fandom, Springsteen, queer culture, emotion, and fashion will all find plenty of infotainment here, and I’d wager, a few solid lines of inquiry that will make them think. Springsteen fans who feel surprised or disgusted by the existence of this podcast should listen to posthaste!

Lawson and Casio should be commended, and if they ever want to take their work to the page, I think their work could easily find its way into Bloomsbury’s 33 1/3 series, U of Texas’s “Music Matters” series, or Duke’s “Singles” series. The day before I drafted this review, Springsteen played a concert five blocks from my house, and though I doubt I will regret not

going, I may, of course, become wrong one day—because, although attaching to a new queer icon doesn't happen overnight or through analysis alone, podcasts such as this one may well be the start of something.