

Book Review: Deconstructing Dirty Dancing by Stephen Lee Naish

In Deconstructing Dirty Dancing, Stephen Lee Naish unpacks the enduring popularity of the film Dirty Dancing, released to mixed reviews in 1987 before going on to become a global hit. Offering a comparative study of the film with David Lynch's Blue Velvet before a scene-by-scene analysis and reflections on the film's personal resonance for the author, the book is an idiosyncratic and accessible take on this cultural phenomenon, finds Penny Montague.

Deconstructing Dirty Dancing. Stephen Lee Naish. Zer0 Books. 2017.

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Dirty Dancing sells a million DVDs per year even now, 30 years after its release (3). In spite of receiving mixed reviews from critics at the time, this low-budget film became a hit through word-of-mouth recommendations. Since then it has inspired two remakes, an ill-fated TV series and a successful musical theatre show, but it is the 1987 original that continues to attract old and new audiences. Many films from the same era appear to have lost their relevance, but the centrality of the abortion plotline in *Dirty Dancing* and its depiction of class conflict remain groundbreaking and noteworthy even today.

Deconstructing Dirty Dancing attempts to unpack the film and reveal the reasons for its longevity. Stephen Lee Naish sets out to prove that *Dirty Dancing*, ostensibly about the romance between Frances 'Baby' Houseman, a middle-class Jewish teenager, and Johnny Castle, a working-class Irish-American dancer at Kellerman's resort, exposes a great deal about America in the early 1960s and beyond. It is a slim volume of fewer than 70 pages, but the range of information it contains belies its size. Naish is an established writer on film, politics and popular culture, and the subject matter of his third book aptly combines those topics.

Naish 'deconstructs' *Dirty Dancing* through three different perspectives: firstly, as a comparative study with the film *Blue Velvet* (1986) by David Lynch; then through a scene-by-scene analysis; before ending with an essay on his personal experience of the film. The cover image gives a visual preview of this approach: a hand-drawn collage of items thematically linked to the film's content, including a doctor's bag, a watermelon and a woman dancing in a hula skirt.

The first section, 'The Strange Coalescence of *Dirty Dancing* and *Blue Velvet*', compares two films that initially appear thoroughly dissimilar in terms of genre, plot and directorial strategy, but also share some compelling similarities. Those who have watched both would benefit most from this discussion, but the summary of *Blue Velvet* is sufficient to service the comparison and to give the reader an understanding of its plot and atmosphere. The author presents a number of parallels between the films, such as the depiction of the early 1960s through the lens of the late 1980s, the loss of innocence and the representation of secret sexual relationships. Some of the comparisons, such as that between the severed ear in *Blue Velvet* and Frances's aural awakening, could be considered tenuous. However, this brief comparative study succeeds in pushing the reader beyond superficial romantic interpretations of *Dirty Dancing*.

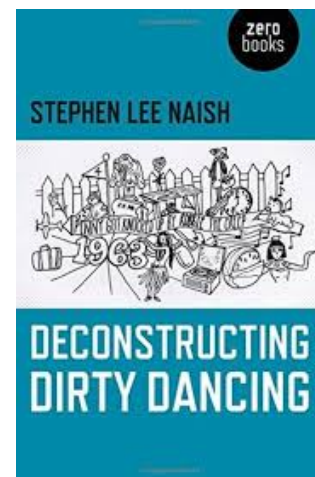




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The references to *Blue Velvet* also continue in the central section, 'Interpretation of *Dirty Dancing*', which is a fascinating study for any student or fan of the movie. The chapters within this section are marked by timestamps from 00:00:00 to 1:37:03, when the end credits roll. The first chapter begins with the description of the Vestron logo, then 'one minute and forty seconds of uninhibited grinding hips, flowing skirts and stares of intense passion' (13) before we are introduced to the Housemans. As they drive to the Kellerman's resort, Frances's voiceover is heard above the sound of the radio: 'That was before President Kennedy was shot. Before the Beatles, when I couldn't wait to join the Peace Corps' (14). Naish's explanation of this quotation presents the early sixties as a period of optimism and innocence in US society and Frances as a symbol of this phase. However, this is belied by the social microcosm shown in Kellerman's resort, even before Frances becomes involved with Johnny.

Throughout this section of the book, Naish analyses and illuminates each moment of the film, its dialogue, music, wardrobe, plot and themes, particularly drawing out its political threads. For example, in the second chapter (00:02:58), Frances's father, the liberal Dr Houseman, jokes with his other daughter, Lisa, when she complains about her lack of coral shoes: 'A tragedy is [...] police dogs used in Birmingham.' Naish explains this reference to the US civil rights struggle as well as Frances's comment about monks immolating themselves in protest. In the following chapter, assistant hotel manager Neil Kellerman's mention of joining the anti-racist Freedom Riders is explained as a possible sign of his participation in the New Left political movement, useful information for non-Americans who may not have understood the reference. However, it soon becomes clear that Neil's apparent liberalism does not extend to his treatment of the dancers. These comments reveal that the conflict and inequality in the resort are class-based: the wealthy resort owners and their guests tolerate the white working-class staff while they support civil rights and international protests.

Not only does Naish interpret the film from a historical perspective, his commentary also decodes the film through a twenty-first-century lens, as shown when he describes Neil as 'mansplaining' during a conversation with Frances (28). Later, the discussion of the crucial scenes concerning the unplanned pregnancy of Penny, Johnny's original dance partner, reminds the reader that the film is set ten years before abortion could be obtained legally in the USA, and so the options available to her as an unmarried woman were to 'abort illegally, or give birth and become an outcast from society' (36). Naish notes the centrality of the abortion subplot to the entire film, and gives credit to the film's screenwriter, Eleanor Bergstein, for not bowing to pressure from sponsors to remove it (38).

The author also engages with existing film scholarship on *Dirty Dancing* and beyond. For example, he applies Michele Scheiber's notion of a 'postfeminist cycle' of contemporary romance films (25) to the narrative, showing how *Dirty Dancing* fits the pattern whilst also subverting it with the lack of a happy-ever-after ending. Furthermore, like a textual film commentary track, the behind-the-scenes information revealed by Naish provides fascinating insights into the crafting of the narrative. For instance, he describes several deleted scenes from the film or early drafts of the screenplay, and reflects on how they might have affected the end result. An example of this is when he reveals a removed scene in which Neil is beaten up by the dancers, which would have made his character more sympathetic (22).

Lastly, the final section, 'A Personal Essay', delivers Naish's individual perspective on the film. He describes being introduced to the film during his childhood by his older sister and being particularly taken by its soundtrack. Later, as a young adult, he felt that he could never live up to Johnny Castle's 'vision of almost-perfect masculinity' (64). Naish also presents the universality of the film in its evocation of family holidays and the awkwardness of approaching a potential love interest, both of which he compares to episodes from his own life growing up in Britain. The essay is an absorbing account of his uneven relationship with the film, which will resonate with a wide range of readers, whether fans of the film or otherwise.

In conclusion, *Deconstructing Dirty Dancing* is an idiosyncratic and accessible analysis of this popular film. I would particularly recommend it to fans seeking insight into the historical, political and cultural contexts surrounding *Dirty Dancing*. It is also an excellent addition to the existing field of scholarship – including [The Time of Our Lives: Dirty Dancing and Popular Culture](#) – related to this enduring popular culture phenomenon.

Penny Montague completed an MA in Literary Linguistics at the University of Nottingham and graduated from The Open University with a BA (Hons) in English Language and Literature. She tweets at [@pjmontague](#). [Read more by Penny Montague](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.