Meredith Warren’s book is a stimulating contribution to long-standing debates over the relationship of the canonical gospels to other Hellenistic literature and over the interpretation of one of John’s thorniest passages. Warren approaches the Fourth Gospel with a well-established set of textual and literary methods but juxtaposes them in new and illuminating ways. As the title reveals, her primary interest is in the bread of life discourse, the controversial pericope in which Jesus insists that his followers must eat his flesh and drink his blood. In order to recover something of the original cultural resonances of this passage beneath the accretions of later sacramental theology, Warren looks outward to the Greek novels and, in particular, their appropriation of the tropes of hero cult. This is a familiar turn; other scholars have used generic conventions in Hellenistic narrative and biography to help locate John’s treatment of Jesus. But Warren pulls on new threads to reveal a new web of meaning in John’s narrative in which this passage is not a later addition but central to John’s portrayal of Jesus’s identity.

Chapter 1, “The Word Was Made Flesh,” summarizes the relevant aspects of scholarship on the Gospel of John in general and John 6:51c–58 in particular. On the question of whether the bread of life discourse is to be understood as eucharistic or christological, Warren obviously takes the christological side, but in this chapter she carefully articulates
her position vis-à-vis other scholars in both camps. Against the eucharistic side, she marshals demonstrations of John’s overriding concern, throughout the gospel, with Jesus’s identity as simultaneously human and divine, to argue that the pericope ought to be understood in this light, as part of a pattern within John’s Gospel of using sharply marked physical signs to indicate divine identity. On the christological side, she distinguishes herself from scholars who suggest that the references to eating should be understood metaphorically as references to Christ’s death. She argues that these interpretations do not go far enough in recognizing the extent to which John is bending generic expectations related to the establishment of hero cult in Hellenistic literature and using food language to make a strong statement about Jesus’s identity as a divine-mortal being. Eating Jesus’s flesh is still an important concept in this system, but it is neither sacramental nor completely metaphorical. To unpack this assertion, Warren devotes the next two chapters to analysis of the complex relationship between divine identity and sacrificial meals in the Hellenistic romance novels.

Chapter 2, “Second Only to Artemis,” turns to the first half of the novelistic equation between divine identity and sacrificial meal. Identity is a major theme of the Hellenistic romances; important plot points turn on concealing or revealing the true parentage or identity of our intrepid heroines. But more significant to Warren’s argument is the frequency with which romance heroines are mistaken for goddesses. She analyzes the epiphanic imagery surrounding them and the tendency of other characters “mistakenly” to worship them as goddesses. The effect of these “divine hints, ironic treatment, and disguise tropes” (92) is to suggest to the discerning reader that the heroine is being mistaken for who she is in reality. Warren concludes that this double ambiguity suggests a “simultaneous ontology in the narrative reality” (94) allowing the heroines to “straddle the boundary of divine and mortal.” But it also reaches back to the epic tradition. By consciously echoing Homeric language of divine identification, the novels co-opt for their heroines certain cultural expectations surrounding sacrificial death of the hero.

Chapter 3 turns to these expectations in order to link the divine identity of the heroines with the patterns of death and consumption that mark the establishment of hero cult. In this, the most complicated stage of the argument, Warren asserts that “the association between the heroine and the divine reaches its climax at the moment of ultimate antagonism: human sacrifice” (118). In order to develop this pattern, she applies Gregory Nagy’s work on divine antagonism and ritual symbiosis in hero cult to the narrative structure of the romance novels, then jumps into a lengthy discussion of the language and meaning of sacrifice in Greek and Roman religion and the taboos surrounding human sacrifice and cannibalism. The important conceptual link here seems to be that ritual consumption, and not the victim’s death alone, is essential for the completion of certain types of sacrifice. In the case of hero cult and the romance heroines, the threat of human
sacrifice evokes the imaginative possibility of human consumption—even when it is ultimately avoided. For Warren, the trope of human sacrifice becomes another way of evoking contemporaneity in the narrative: even when the heroines are not actually killed, the narrative creates suspense in such a way that they are killed—and eaten—in the anticipatory vision of the reader. This sacrifice confirms the identification between the hero victim and the divinity responsible for his or her death.

All of this is an elaborate set-up for the final chapter, “My Flesh Is Meat Indeed,” where Warren brings these ideas to bear directly on John 6:51b–58 to argue that John “repurposes the sacrificial language of eating flesh and drinking blood in order to make Jesus’ divine identity explicit” (191). John’s innovation with genre comes into sharper view here. While the novels associate anthropophagy with divine identity by not describing the actual consumption but leaving enough ambiguity to make it real in the imaginations of the readers, John’s Jesus makes the act explicit in the narrative. The shocking assertion that drinking his blood is necessary for his followers to have life does more, Warren argues, than simply weed out any squeamish disciples. It actually identifies Jesus as divine by collapsing divine antagonism, sacrificial death, and consumption into a single contemporaneous narrative event that creates identification between Jesus and God in the heroic mode.

So Warren concludes that this famous pericope “embeds a sacrificial ritual in narrative” (234); in other words, it draws on an established tradition of linking divine identity with sacrificial death, consumption, and cult formation in narrative in order to make a statement about Jesus’s identity. Warren’s insights into the ways that narrative ambiguity works to evoke double realities, both of time and of identity, are particularly valuable as demonstrations of the constructive power of absence and allusion. Warren uses the romance novels to construct a surprisingly sturdy bridge between the heroic mode of divine identification and John’s narrative Christology, which uses grotesquely physical images of human sacrifice to evoke simultaneous death and life, consumption and nonconsumption, divinity and humanity.

In her contention that the sacrifice and consumption described in John 6 occur only at the level of narrative, Warren may overstate the separation between text and practice. The sacrificial trajectory of the romantic heroine follows the pattern of the establishment of a hero cult, but no cult of Chariclea or Leucippe is known to have existed. Warren’s attempt to explain the bread of life discourse as equally contained by narrative—a “ritual in ink”—is immediately complicated by our knowledge that a cultic practice did exist among worshipers of Jesus. Warren’s insistence on the separation is, of course, extremely useful as a heuristic device for focusing our attention on these literary constructions and stands as a necessary challenge to the tendency to reduce food language in Christian texts to
overdetermined eucharistic references. But I suspect that this reading of the pericope as a dramatic and even shocking statement of divine identity has further implications for our understanding of early Christian cult practice as well as for other types of ritualized eating in narrative.