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David H. Walker, *Consumer Chronicles: Cultures of Consumption in Modern French Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011. vii + 328 pp. Bibliography and index. \$95.00 US (cl). ISBN: 9781846314872.

Review by Cheryl Leah Krueger, University of Virginia.

Jean Valmy-Baysse speculated that in the 1920s, savvy shoppers carried in their minds a topographical plan of Paris comparable to the seventeenth-century Carte de Tendre; an updated mental map, charting not the itinerary of love, but the capital's landmark department stores.[1] In *Consumer Chronicles*, David H. Walker shows that a similar sort of shoppers' map has been plotted across the pages of modern French novels. In this aptly titled book, Walker chronicles consumers in two ways: first, by offering a comprehensive overview of modern France's commercialization as theorized by sociologists and cultural historians; then by combing through a remarkable corpus of canonical and less studied fiction, to reveal depictions of behavior related to selling, desiring, advertising, acquiring, and even remembering merchandise.

Working from the premise that literary texts and historical facts function symbiotically, illuminating one another, Walker examines an impressive number of fictional narratives that "bear witness and give significance to the development of the consumer society" (p. 12). This six-part study, subdivided into seventeen chapters, opens on the gradual awakening of consumer consciousness in late nineteenth-century Paris. From there, Walker blazes a trail to the twentieth century, closing with a contemplative section on the hyper-awareness of product names and slogans evident in a selected compilation of commodity-infused memories from Perec's *Je me souviens*: "Je me souviens de 'fond dans la bouche et pas dans la main' [...] Je me souviens des 'Juvaquatre'" (p. 306).[2]

In his lucid introduction, Walker presents summaries of theories related to consumer culture and *consommation*. Deftly articulating points of convergence and contention along a rich theoretical trajectory, Walker finds touchstones in Paul Leroy-Beaulieu's 1894 essay on the luxury market, Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, Herbert Marcuse's blockbuster study on the alienating force of mass consumer society, Jean Baudrillard's code of differential values, and Michel de Certeau's mapping of consumption.[3] This theoretical overview sets the stage for a reading of fiction that highlights references to consumer culture, showing how passages of French fiction harmonize with socio-economic realities of their day, and how they illustrate economic social theory.

Part one, "Waiting for Consumer Society," treats works by Joris-Karl Huysmans still largely eclipsed by his more celebrated *À Rebours* (1884). Walker points out that in these earlier pieces—*Les Sœurs Vatard* (1870), *En Ménage* (1881), and *À vau-l'eau* (1882)—stories spring from the era's most commercialized corner of Paris, the 6th arrondissement. Surrounded by shops and goods, Huysmans' characters observe and critique a proliferation of storefronts and transactions, not only in reported conversation, but more compellingly, in subjectively slanted descriptive passages that Walker calls ironic, splendid "prose poems on the everyday" (p. 47). These

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budding consumers, at first engaged in an unfocused window-shopper's flânerie, gradually demonstrate an inchoate awareness of the relationship between objects and social aspiration.

Part two, "Commodities of Consumption," which consists of one chapter on André Gide's *L'Immoraliste*, draws out more complex tensions between desire and value, moral and material worth. Moving back to the sort of shopping venues visited in the Huysmans chapters, part three ("Small Shops") and part four ("Big Stores") challenge exaggerated reports of *petits commerces* crushed by *grands magasins*. Drawing on Philip Nord's study of shopkeepers in Third-Republic Paris<sup>[5]</sup>, Walker emphasizes here, and throughout the book, that Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames* had much to do with the propagation of an urban shopping legend. He advocates a more nuanced view of how small business and super stores coexisted and coevolved. Zola's iconic novel provides a point of reference throughout this section. However, less studied novels, such as Vaymy-Baysse's *Les Comptoirs de Vénus*, Margeuritte's *La Garçonne*, and Le Clézio's *Le Géant*, justifiably steal the show. Finally, in part five, "Economies of Consumption," we return to the notion of fluctuating value, but this time in relation to gold, coins, speculation and counterfeiting. The path toward consumer (hyper) awareness, and hyper-awareness of the consumer culminates in part six, "Reflections on the Consumer Society," which deals with the Americanization of France (deplored since the nineteenth century), advertising stunts and product placement.

On its back cover, *Consumer Chronicles* proposes close readings of novels. However, this is not the sort of detailed textual analysis that some literary scholars might anticipate. Asserting that works of fiction provide evidence of social and cultural practices, Walker tends to steady his focus away from literary analysis per se. Instead, carefully selected examples from novels create a sort of literary ethnography of consumer attitudes and behaviors. Walker shows many times over, in discussions of nearly fifty primary works, that commercialization and consumer culture serve as a backdrops, major themes, and even preoccupations in a vast number of literary works. The topoi and groupings of texts that emerge from his reading will undoubtedly inspire further studies, from both literary and historical perspectives.

Despite its density of examples and documentation, Walker's prose remains clear, readable, even playful. The greatest strength of this book lies in the author's ability to synthesize vast amounts of information from primary and secondary works in order to tell a coherent story. Works of fiction unfold in time and in tandem with a thoroughly documented history of consumer culture in modern France. By placing novels in dialogue with social history and with one another, Walker shows that the books we may sometimes take for granted as being related, such as Balzac's *Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau* and Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames* or Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Belles images* and Claire Etcherelli's *Elise ou la vraie vie*, merit re-reading alongside less explored fiction, and in the context of consumer culture. For all of these reasons, although each of *Consumer Chronicles*'s seventeen chapters stands on its own, the shopaholic consumer of fiction may prefer to read the volume cover to cover, pausing at familiar and unfamiliar literary signposts, taking detours, and lingering at all of the storefronts along the way.

## NOTES

[1] Jean Valmy-Baysse, *Les Grands magasins* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927), pp. 34-35, as quoted in Walker, p. 182.

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[2] Georges Perec, *Je me souviens* (Paris: Hachette, 1978). These are items numbered 395 and 418 in Perec's book.

[3] Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, "Le Luxe: La fonction de la richesse," *Revue des deux mondes* (1 novembre, 1894): 72-100; Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: The Ideology of Industrial Society* (London: Sphere Books, 1968); Jean Baudrillard, *La Société de consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970); Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*, vol. 1, *Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

[4] Philip Nord. *Paris Shopkeepers and the Politics of Resentment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP) 1986.

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