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Rachel Mesch, *Having it All in the Belle Époque: How French Women's Magazines Invented the Modern Woman*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2013. xii + 241 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8047-8424-5; 39.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0-8047-8713-0.

Review by Cheryl A. Morgan, Hamilton College.

In the acknowledgments to her new book, Rachel Mesch discloses that her “love at first sight” for the early twentieth-century French magazines *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* transformed her experience of research and inspired the present study of these luxurious, illustrated women’s magazines (p. ix). The central argument of *Having it All* is that these avowedly non-feminist magazines created an overlooked yet important ideal of modern French femininity. Neither campaigning feminist nor New Woman, their “modern woman” was one who did not have to choose between femininity and feminism.[1] As such, she provided another means of resisting gender norms during the Belle Époque and modeled what it meant to “have it all”: “devoted husband, fulfilling family, beautiful home, and, if not a satisfying vocation, at least some sort of outlet for self-expression, all while maintaining her impeccable appearance” (p. 4). *Having it All* locates *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* in media history and situates their modern woman in a more capacious feminist history. At the same time, Mesch’s study furthers understanding of Belle Époque women’s literary culture by highlighting its role and reception in the print culture of the time.

Developing crucial points made by Lenard Berlanstein, who argues that *Femina* was a successful feminist publication, Mesch offers engaging intricate readings of the magazines’ celebration of feminine, elegant, achieving women before she moves beyond their pages to consider both the magazines’ relationship to the actual authors they promoted and their reception by the larger public.[2] Mesch engages productively with previous scholarship from a number of French studies areas: French women’s history, fin-de-siècle celebrity and gender, and mass culture and consumerism.[3] Readers will appreciate both the variety of source materials considered and Mesch’s astute reading of the magazines’ strategic use of photography and Art nouveau motifs to visualize modern French womanhood.[4]

One of the strengths of *Having it All* is its careful analysis of the magazines’ use of the latest media mechanisms to promote a highly visual ideal of modern French femininity. While this richly illustrated study (over fifty images) concerns itself primarily with the first decade or so of the magazines’ existence, visual and textual readings are contextualized in the years 1880-1914; the 1880 Camille Sée law increased women’s access to education and the 1884 Naquet law allowed divorce in some instances, but France lagged when it came to suffrage and other rights for women. Looking “beyond traditional historical markers of change” such as legal and institutional reform to map subtle ideological shifts regarding gender roles, *Having it All* offers much more than a study of *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* (p. 187). Mesch’s concept of Belle Époque literary feminism opens a new perspective onto the matrix of Belle Époque women’s magazines, popular women’s fiction, and their female readers. At once a new discursive space and an optimistic stance towards women’s achievement, Belle Époque literary feminism invented “a vibrant universe, an alternate reality, in which certain kinds of feminist fantasies were normalized, made both accessible and desirable” (p. 9).

A noteworthy contribution to the study of Belle Epoque culture, *Having It All* also claims a timely importance by offering an important historical context that seeks to sharpen understanding of the continuing emphasis on “traditional forms of femininity” in the French feminist tradition (p. 27). *Having it All* also holds that the challenges faced by the Belle Epoque modern woman persist today for educated women—who are predominantly, it must be said, married and with a reasonable income—“on both sides of the Atlantic” (p. 28).

The introductory chapter, “*Femina*, *La Vie Heureuse* and the Invention of the *Femme Moderne*,” describes the genesis and overall format of the two magazines, presents the concept of Belle Epoque literary feminism and the magazines’ figure of the modern woman. Both magazines were the product, on the one hand, of an elite and conservative literary *Tout Paris* and on the other, of democratizing forces of fin-de-siècle mass culture. The resulting publications fused “the exclusiveness of the salon with the openness of the department store” (p. 5). After experienced publicist Pierre Laffitte launched *Femina* in 1901, Hachette followed suit in 1902 with rival magazine *La Vie Heureuse*, directed by Caroline de Broutelles.

Part One, “Readers and Writers,” focuses on the special bond the magazines forged with readers, first, by encouraging their participation in contests and opinion surveys and second, by cultivating their identification with achieving women celebrated in careful visual and textual features. Chapter one, “*Chères Lectrices*: Cinderella Powder, Poet Queens, and the Woman Reader,” offers an astute reading that joins the magical outcomes promised by an advertisement for Cinderella powder in *Femina* with the magazines’ editorial transformation of royal mothers, queen poets, and finally, women writers into media stars. Mesch examines how the magazines promoted female authorship, facilitated the creation of the Femina Prize, and encouraged women’s literary consecration.

Chapter two, “Beyond the Bluestocking: Images of Work-Life Balance in the Belle Epoque,” focuses on the magazines’ innovative framing and staging of women writers in the context of Belle Epoque visual and mass culture. Harnessing the latest technology and trends in photography to energetic and elegant Art Nouveau designs, the magazines created a model of the sophisticated creative woman who balanced tradition with the modern. If the principal message concerning writers such as Marcelle Tinayre, Anna de Noailles, Daniel Lesueur and others was that the modern woman could have “books and babies,” Mesch also points to tensions in the editorial agenda, suggested, for example, by an image of Tinayre at her desk and awkwardly holding her child’s hand (p. 76). In their air-brushed world of the woman writer as a new kind of regal celebrity, the magazines labor hard to dissociate her from the enduring stereotype of the masculinized *bas-bleu* and transform her into a charming model for reader emulation.

Just as the magazines capitalized on their appeal, women writers were “major stakeholders in Belle Epoque literary feminism” who in turn benefitted from the magazines’ endorsement of them (p. 107). Chapter three, “The ‘Oriental’ Authoress: Myriam Harry and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus,” focuses on how the magazines managed to make stars out of two unlikely candidates, both associated with the Middle East. Mesch decodes the strategies used by *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* to contain Harry’s and Delarue-Mardrus’s threat to French gender norms by adapting the visual trope of the exotic orient normally linked to female sexuality. In contrast to such editorial manipulation, chapter four, “The Writer Writes Back,” aims to understand better the women writers’ relationship to their public image and their role in the magazines. Mesch centers on two writers who became contributors to *Femina*, Marcelle Tinayre and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, to show how each in her own way participated in and commented on the work of the magazines. The authors’ particular interventions illuminate the ways in which *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* “exploited the performance of femininity as a feminist strategy” (p. 120).

Part two, “Texts and Contexts,” moves beyond the magazines to consider their influence as well as the disparity between their sense of their mission and the larger public perception of them. Chapter five, “A New Man for the New Woman? Belle Epoque Literary Feminism and the Marriage Plot,” brings into relief the important circular exchange between women’s fiction and the magazines by examining the

relay concerning the “marriage crisis” debate at the turn of the century. In contrast to the magazines’ cautious promotion of the wife as her spouse’s thinking associate, Mesch shows how certain novels by women engaged more boldly with such topics, in turn spurring debate in the magazines. Noting the dismay of *La Vie Heureuse* readers at the ending of Colette Yver’s 1907 *Princesses de science*, where the female protagonist abandons her medical career to save her marriage, Mesch considers happier solutions to the marriage problem in two other novels, Louise Marie Compain’s *L’un vers l’autre* (1903) and Tinayre’s *La rebelle* (1905). Both stand as “feminist fables” because a young couple’s marriage is saved when the husband finally accepts feminist values (p. 131). Mesch sees the “feminist fantasy of male transformation” in these novels both as a complement to the optimistic world of the magazines and a counter-narrative to realist and naturalist plots that punish their wayward bourgeois female protagonists (p. 137).

The final two chapters explore a major gulf between the confident Belle Epoque literary feminism and outsider readers and writers blind to the magazines’ careful balance of femininity and feminism. In chapter six, “Jean Lorrain’s Women’s Magazine: Emma Bovary Meets Celebrity Culture,” Mesch reads Lorrain’s 1908 roman à clef *Maison des dames* as a “literary revenge” against thinking women and their magazine culture (p. 154). A former collaborator at *Femina*, Lorrain lifts excerpts from *Femina* to depict its fictitious Paris competitor *Le Laurier d’Or* as morally decadent and greedy. The novel follows the rise and fall of young Madame Emma Farnier, a muse from the provinces who wins *Le Laurier d’Or*’s poetry contest. She travels to Paris, husband in tow, to collect her prize and bask in her sudden glory only to fall prey to the nether world of the Parisian press. *Maison des dames*, writes Mesch, like *Madame Bovary* and Maupassant’s “La Parure,” is another “Cinderella-stor[y] gone awry” and Lorrain is incapable of newly imagining a creative woman in the city of delight (p. 151). Chapter seven, “A Belle Epoque Media Storm: Marcelle Tinayre and the Legion of Honor,” examines another instance of tonal dissonance between the ideal world of the women’s magazines and larger public opinion. In 1908, Tinayre’s modest but public comments about her possible nomination for the Legion of Honor ignited a media storm in which she was attacked for a “disingenuous feminine modesty” that trivialized the national honor. Tinayre’s case points to the contradictions regarding gender and celebrity at the time wherein “women’s fame was only acceptable to the extent that they did not appear to have orchestrated it or desired it” (p. 167).

In the conclusion, “Imagining the *Académicienne*,” Mesch considers press response to renewed debate in 1909–1910 about women’s “academization” in order to take a final measure of the limits of Belle Epoque literary feminism. Analyzing the treatment of the question in *Femina* and in the generalist press, Mesch interprets the “imaginative mechanisms” of the women’s magazines as an elegant dodge of the debate, whose terms would not be resolved until 1980 when the first woman was finally elected to the French Academy. *Femina* asked its readers to nominate a fictional women’s Academy, published photo-shopped images of the reader-elected women’s Academy in the halls of the real institution, displayed fashionable designs of regalia for certain “members,” and went so far as to publish a series of hypothetical welcome speeches to hypothetical inductees. Such a gap between fantasy and reality, writes Mesch, explains both why it has been hard to “measure women’s progress in the Belle Epoque” and why scholars have been “slow to recognize the crucial feminist engagement of these publications” (p. 187). Yet, it is precisely the imaginative work of Belle Epoque literary feminism that is significant, holds Mesch. As the popular novels by women traced new trajectories for female achievements (career, modern marriage), so did the magazines offer persuasive “visual evidence” that such success stories were just within reach of their readers (p. 188).

Still, *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* had a fateful rendez-vous with history. In 1916, Hachette bought *Femina* from the financially strapped Lafitte and merged it with *La Vie Heureuse*. After World War I, its model of the aristocratic modern woman no longer tenable, the magazine fared poorly in the postwar media market and was eventually “diluted to a simple fashion magazine catering to a wealthy, upper-class audience” (p. 190). Given the earlier success of *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse*, *Elle* magazine’s 1954

photo-shopped crowd of new women writers, accompanied by a tally of their novels and children, appears in an historical vacuum, as if the vibrant literary community built by Belle Epoque literary feminism had never existed. *Having it All* corrects such amnesia by returning to the tangled roots of modern French womanhood.

However intriguing Mesch's assertions about the pertinence of Belle Epoque literary feminism to ongoing debates about what it means to "have it all," this reader hoped for more from her than what felt like passing treatment of the eponymous concept. The suggestiveness of her claims did prompt interesting questions, though. Why did Mesch not contextualize her title's American catchphrase, "having it all," whose coinage is attributed to the pioneering and controversial *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown?[6] What would a cross-cultural comparison of the Belle Epoque magazines' "modern woman" and Brown's "Cosmo girl" reveal? Are there any ties between Belle Epoque literary feminism and Gurley Brown's early version of lipstick feminism?[7] These questions may lead beyond the purview of *Having it All*, but the title of the book invites them, especially given the term's new currency in the media frenzy triggered by Anne-Marie Slaughter's 2012 *Atlantic* article "Why Women Still Can't Have it All." [8]

Finally, with its forward-looking perspective, *Having it All* tends to turn away from the French women's press of and prior to the Belle Epoque, which leads Mesch to overstate somewhat the exceptional status of *Femina's* and *La Vie Heureuse's* ambivalent feminism. While she rightly links the originality of their modern look to their modern woman, I could not help but think of the "unfashionable feminism" of the July Monarchy women's periodical, *Le Journal des femmes*. Rejecting association with the Saint-Simonian "new woman" and the frumpy *bas-bleu*, it promoted an ideal thinking and writing woman for the nineteenth-century. Its apolitical and moderate agenda notwithstanding, *Le Journal des femmes* ended up forging its own version of "literary feminism" by celebrating another vibrant community of women writers and readers.[9] Here too, my remarks serve to highlight the ability of *Having it All* to stimulate and promote further inquiry.

Having It All is a well-researched, richly textured, and readable study built upon detailed, elegant readings of Belle Epoque visual and print culture. At the same time, it elucidates important and dynamic relations of journalism and female literary culture in the Belle Epoque. Deftly bringing into play the multiple perspectives of literary, visual, and cultural studies, Mesch's romance with *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* constitutes a welcome contribution to French studies that will engage students and scholars of print media, women's history, gender studies and French literary culture.

NOTES

[1] Mesch joins other scholars who examine challenges to gender roles previously disregarded by scholarship in women's history and the French press. See, for example, Mary Louis Roberts, *Disruptive Acts. The New Woman in Fin-de-siècle France* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 2002) and Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr, eds., *A 'Belle Epoque'? Women in French Society and Culture, 1890-1914* (New York and London: Berghahn Books 2006).

[2] Lenard R. Berlanstein, "Selling Modern Femininity: *Femina*, a Forgotten Feminist Publishing Success in Belle Epoque France," *French Historical Studies* 30 (Fall 2007): 623-49. For another view of *Femina*, see Colette Cosnier, *Les Dames de Femina. Un féminisme mystifié* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009) and Berlanstein's review of her work in *H-France* Volume 9:134 (November 2009): 566-569.

[3] See, for example, Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Lenard R. Berlanstein, "Historicizing and Gendering

Celebrity Culture: Famous Women in Nineteenth-Century France,” *Journal of Women’s History* 16.4 (2004): 65–91; and Lisa Tiersten, *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[4] Principal sources include Elizabeth Emery, *Photojournalism and the Origins of the French Writer House Museum* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012) and Deborah Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

[5] Mona Ozouf, *Women’s Words: Essays on French Singularity*, translated by Jane Marie Todd (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[6] Helen Gurley Brown, *Having it All: Love, Success, Sex, Money Even If You’re Starting With Nothing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982). Before taking over as editor of *Cosmopolitan* in 1965, Brown published her best-seller *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962) and floated a prospectus for a magazine to be called *Femme*.

[7] Jennifer Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown, the Woman Behind Cosmopolitan Magazine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Scanlon argues that Brown’s feminism has more in common with today’s third-wave feminism than the second-wave feminism of her day and has been largely ignored by histories of postwar feminism.

[8] Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All,” *The Atlantic* June 13, 2012: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>. Accessed March 15, 2014.

[9] Cheryl A. Morgan, “Unfashionable feminism? Designing Women Writers in the *Journal des Femmes* (1832-1836),” in Dean de la Motte and Juliette Przyblyski eds., *Making the News: Modernity and the Mass Press in Nineteenth-Century France* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), pp. 207-232

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