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Oana Sabo, *The Migrant Canon in Twenty-First Century France*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. x + 198 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$50 U.S. ISBN 978-1-4962-0494-3

Review by Felisa Vergara Reynolds, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Oana Sabo's *The Migrant Canon in Twenty-First-Century France* suggests that recent "Migration Narratives" are published and achieve success through a process she dubs "literary consecration" (p. 2). What is meant by literary consecration is the manner in which editors, booksellers, and literary prizes all work in consort to assure the success of a Migrant Novel. It is through this paratextual mechanism, Sabo argues, that this once-marginal genre has become "an integral part of criticism and publishing today" (p. 3). This book acknowledges and builds on the work of Miletić and Porra, whose research explores how "authorial strategies affect literary reception" by offering an expansive look at what other factors play a role in the success of a Migrant Novel (p. 19). Sabo traces the ever-increasing popularity of the genre by observing changes in the French literary field from 2000 to 2016. Her research reveals that Migrant Literature has become a valuable commodity in the French publishing world. The irony is not lost on Sabo that the success of this genre is rather paradoxical in light of the rising anti-immigrant discourse in France, thanks to the likes of the Front National, amongst others. This latest iteration of the Migrant Novel, which she describes as a "Zeitgeist-Genre" is significant for it captures the first decade of this millennium by addressing the legacy of France's colonial history and its decades-long complicated relationship with migrants (p. 18).

While Migrant Literature is not a new genre, Sabo's book provides a fresh look at how the Migrant Novel has evolved since the 1980s and 1990s. The current Migrant Novel is far removed from the '80s and '90s and their previously prevalent themes focused on portraying "cosmopolitan elites and their cultural preoccupations" (p. 25). Sabo shows how the Migrant Novels of the new millennium have moved from focusing on "hybrid identities" and "cultural in betweenness" to "the economic and political factors that underpin migration" (p. 20). It is particularly noteworthy that Sabo juxtaposes the current migrant canon and its reception in France and the reception of the same genre in 1980s and 1990s Québec. This no doubt is in no small part because chapter four focuses on Dany Laferrière and his early career in Québec. Nevertheless, it will be of great interest to readers to discover that contrary to the Migrant Novel in France today, the same genre in Québec, in decades prior, owes its success to an alignment with the Québécois "defense and promotion of the French language" (p. 21). Thus migrant writers such as Laferrière willing to write in French largely contributed to their promotion and the success that followed. Sabo notes that this is in direct opposition to how migrant texts were viewed during this same time period in France, for they were seen "in relation to exclusionary ideas of national identity" (p. 22). The book also notes that the '80s in France are seen more as a period of Beur literature, which is more of a sub-genre of migrant literature. Sabo does not devote much time to Beur literature, except to make some biting observations on how this genre did not fully achieve the recognition of the Migrant Novel, due to its unwillingness to be pigeonholed into certain specific tropes such as "banlieue life, intergeneration tensions, and cultural identity quests" (p. 23).

On an aside, Sabo also takes to task the so-called “allophone” writers that rose to the top of the French literary scene in the 1990s. Migrant authors such as Semprún and Kundera are gently excoriated for having exploited the trope of “France as a land of Hospitality” and “Paris as the world’s capital” in their writing (p. 24). Sabo suggests that these authors wrote in French and specifically included those themes to “enhance positive reception” and thus ensure the commercial success of their work (p. 24).

The introduction, which sets out the premise of the book with brio, consists of outlining the various paratextual marketing strategies involved in assuring the success of a Migrant Novel. Additionally, Sabo explains how the success of the novel is aided by intra-textual strategies that exploit certain leitmotifs like sea crossings, detention centers, lack of papers, and assimilation, but also the universal themes of “memory and filiation” (p. 27). Conspicuously, the new Migrant Novel appears to reject earlier tropes, of migrant literature of the 1980s and 1990s, such as that of the white European savior. In chapter one, we are given a behind-the-scenes look at what goes into producing a Migrant Novel and ensuring its commercial success with the help of “wide-ranging marketing strategies” (p. 37). Those strategies include employing specific book jacket designs, carefully worded back of the book excerpts containing key buzzwords, and the promotion of the author as a migrant success story (one such example is Dany Laferrière, the subject of chapter four). According to Sabo, these “editorial interventions” are crucial in assigning a literary value to a Migrant Novel, and thus ensuring its success (p. 63). Chapter two examines the reception of the Migrant Novel, and the role played by online reviews of the work. Sabo shows how the shift from reviews exclusively written by professional literary critics towards online reviews on bookseller and reading group sites has greatly benefited the Migrant Novel. This more democratic world of literary reviews allows lay readers and not just literary critics to confer “literary legitimation” to authors that otherwise might not be recognized (p. 68). The clout of online reviewers is such that they have begun to award literary prizes that impact the reception of a Migrant Novel.

Chapter three further delves into what it means to “consecrate” a novel by focusing on La Porte Dorée, a literary prize awarded specifically for Migrant Novels by the Musée national de l’histoire de l’immigration. Though this award is de facto State sponsored, due to its affiliation with a French national museum, Sabo shows how it has nevertheless shaken up the literary prize world. Much like online reviews have democratized literary criticism, so has La Porte Dorée. Unlike other long-established and more prestigious literary prizes in France like the Prix Goncourt, La Porte Dorée is awarded by a rotating jury that consists of “literary critics, journalists, booksellers, politicians, members of the museum” and high school students (p. 102). Furthermore, Sabo points out that this prize’s overtly political mission, which values political engagement over pure aesthetics, distinguishes it from “other French literary prizes that purport to reward solely aesthetic value” (p. 107). Chapter four represents an amalgamation of all of the strategies previewed in the previous chapters: Production, Reception, and Consecration. For Sabo all three of those strategies come together in the person of Dany Laferrière. He is, per the aforementioned criteria, the successful Migrant Novel author par excellence. In this chapter she meticulously plots Laferrière’s calculated ascension to the Académie Française, starting with his early writing days in Québec. Sabo suggests that Laferrière is a savvy architect who used “macro- and micro-approaches” to methodologically exploit his particular brand of auto-fiction (p. 131). Far from casting this in a pejorative light, Sabo stands rather in awe of “Laferrière’s market awareness” and his ability to promote his work and achieve a success paralleled by few in the literary world, in the Migrant Novel genre or otherwise. *The Migrant Canon in Twenty-First-Century France* concludes briefly by neatly recapping the idea that the Migrant Novel is a construct not only of the present time but also of an elaborate mechanism pushing it towards commercial success. Sabo makes it clear that so long as the Migrant Novel continues to be commercially viable, then interest in the genre on the part of the literary commercial and editorial world will continue.

Students and scholars of the Migrant Novel and of Francophone literature will read this book with great interest. This book is especially valuable for Sabo’s impressive lists of Migrant Novels. These lists, which are included in various chapters, can readily be translated into reading lists for students. A small

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critique of an otherwise excellent and well-researched book would be that chapter two would have benefitted from fewer long synopses of novels and more discussion around the actual role played by online reviews in bolstering the Migrant Novel and ensuring its success. Nevertheless, this book is a welcome addition to French and Francophone studies.

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