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Diana Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters: Women's Reading and the Literary Canon in France since the Belle Époque*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018. 244 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-78694-156-5.

Review by Rachel Mesch, Yeshiva University.

The stakes of Diana Holmes's *Middlebrow Matters: Women's Reading and the Literary Canon in France since the Belle Époque* are most clearly articulated in her closing lines: "French literature," she writes, "generally refers to a French canon, heavily male-gendered." But "if we use the term instead to mean "literature that has pleased and affected a majority of French-speaking readers,' then literary history and contemporary criticism change both in content and in emphasis." As a result of such a shift, what Holmes designates as the "middlebrow" comes into view: "a creative space of imagination tempered by a desire to understand and get to grips with the real: as the vital 'transitional space' of culture" (p. 222).

Holmes turns to a variety of tools—literary, sociological, and historical—to define the "subfield of the middlebrow," or "what the average regular reader reads" (p. 1). Her "reclaiming of the middlebrow" is predicated on the notion that since the beginning of the twentieth century, France has privileged modernism and difficulty over mimesis and immersivity. Holmes acknowledges that the category of middlebrow is a slippery one, but identifies the following key aspects of middlebrow fiction: "the creation of a satisfyingly entrancing imaginary world, the geography of which is both emotionally compelling and addresses the spatial syntax of the readers' own experience; effective plotting that provides a coherent patterning of experience whilst acknowledging the messiness of the contingent; compelling characters who invite at least partial empathy; some degree of thematic substance, often concerned with implicitly or explicitly the changing sociocultural realities of readers' lives" (p. 30).

After an initial theoretical chapter defining the terminology, Holmes proceeds largely chronologically. Chapter two addresses "The Birth of the Middlebrow," with the Belle Époque as the period that created the conditions for "the large-scale production of middlebrow fiction" (p. 32). With concise historical overviews, Holmes describes the emergence of a new bourgeoisie, and with it, middle-class women eager for stories "that staged the potentially conflicted relationship between the aspiration to personal fulfillment and the social imperative of marriage and maternity" (p. 41). The latter part of the chapter focuses on two best-selling women writers, Daniel Lesueur (the *nom de plume* adopted by Jeanne Loiseau) and Marcelle Tinayre. Because the category of middlebrow is defined by its immersive nature, much of this section is devoted to analytical summaries of Lesueur's and Tinayre's writings, in order to demonstrate the ways their

novels grappled with questions that would be relatable to their readers. Subsequent chapters follow a similar structure.

Chapter three turns to Colette, whom Holmes characterizes in the chapter title as a “middlebrow modernist.” She aims to read Colette from a new perspective by demonstrating that her stories remained accessible to a “non-intellectual readership” even as she experimented with style and genre (p. 61). To designate Colette as a middlebrow novelist serves to demonstrate that the subject matter she wrote about appealed to middle-class readers, thus displaying continuity with other women writers of her time. Chapter four, “The Case of the Missing Middlebrow,” explores why there was no “proliferation of female-authored, market pleasing, durably readable fiction” in France in the interwar period, as there was in England at the same time during the heyday of the British middlebrow (p. 92). Chapter five is devoted to Françoise Sagan, whom Holmes sees as exemplary of the middlebrow aesthetic, and whose “charm depends on a vivid evocation of place, on slight yet compelling plots, a cast of credibly conflicted and imperfect characters, and a skillfully transparent narrative style” (p. 149). Chapters six and seven then take a different turn from the chronological structure, first considering the role of literary prizes in fostering a middlebrow readership, and then charting the relevance of the middlebrow category for a twenty-first-century literary scene. The book closes with Holmes’ own effort to engage in a “double reading of a single text” (p. 4). She turns to Marie NDiaye’s *Trois femmes puissantes*, the winner of the 2009 Prix Goncourt, to explore the differences between academic engagement with a text and an immersive reading. She argues, in conclusion, that academic readings fail to engage with the pleasures of reading as one of the driving principles of the modern novel.

Holmes is passionately engaged with her subject matter, devoting attention to writers and novels that rightfully deserve it. She is a world-renowned expert in the field of French women writers and has written on an impressively wide range of them, making her an ideal scholar to tackle the large period of time covered by the book—from the Belle Epoque to the present.^[1] But the terms of her analysis, particularly the notion of the “middlebrow” at its heart, never quite seem to fit the texts to which she applies them. The term itself, borrowed from the British, has no equivalent in French, as Holmes notes in the opening pages, but she has chosen to use it because “the word’s dismissive charge is strongly present in the way that literature, and specifically the novel, is evaluated in France” (p. 2).

Yet if, by Holmes’ own admission, this category both did not exist and is inherently negatively coded, why reclaim it? Holmes answers this question by arguing that “to turn critical attention to the middlebrow constitutes a feminist gesture” that will resituate “women-authored texts and women as readers in the literary foreground” (p. 2). Yet to be in the foreground of a category that, by its very nomenclature, both takes a secondary position and is associated with mediocrity is a humble aspiration indeed. It would be one thing to challenge the relegation of these novels to the denigrated space of the middlebrow. Holmes’ objective, however, is to underline the importance of a space that she admits has been circumscribed by “the gendered nature of the assumptions that govern the literary field” (p. 2). As much as any other literary scholar, Holmes is aware of these biases, and thus wishes to shine a positive light on the work of the women writers she has brought together in this volume. Too often, however, Holmes’ own use of the category of middlebrow fails to put forth a clear critique of those biases, instead revealing itself as a product of them.

Beginning with the displacement of realism by modernism, Holmes argues that “modernism gendered mass or mainstream culture feminine and claimed for itself the intellectual potency of the new” (p. 9). But why accept modernism’s gendering? Of Colette as “middlebrow modernist,” Holmes writes of her ability to bridge these different readerships: “None of her great contemporaries such as Proust, Gide or Valéry achieved this—or indeed even sought to do so. Nor of course did any of them lay down their pens to go and dance semi-naked on a music-hall stage, or write columns for the mainstream press that mixed handy recipes with exquisitely crafted stories” (p. 61). If Colette’s great power was to break down boundaries of gender, culture and readership, why confine her to the category of the “middlebrow,” especially if that very status is what has caused her to be overlooked in the first place? To put it another way: the problem is not that Colette is “middlebrow,” combining both seriousness and accessibility, but rather that her seriousness (and that of many other writers in this volume) has been overlooked by patriarchal taste-makers who didn’t recognize it as such.

Beyond the theoretical questions about the gendering of taste and the canon brought up by use of the term “middlebrow,” there are other risks in using a term not organically derived from France’s own history or from its own expressions of discomfort with shifting gender roles. The chapter on the “missing middlebrow” unwittingly suggests, by its very framing, that “middlebrow” as a lens for French literary history simply is not apt. Holmes identifies Colette again, as well as Irène Némirovsky, as the two main examples of the French middlebrow of this time. She notes certain factors—the absence of a network of libraries and prevailing misogyny—that may have contributed to the lack of the kinds of works found in Britain. But what does it mean for a kind of work to be presumed “missing” in one country, simply because it was present in another? The question itself is not quite right, and distracts from an argument that helps us appreciate the stakes of Colette’s and Némirovsky’s works, or helps us understand the shifting tastes of French women readers.

Holmes does acknowledge that the boundaries of the “brows” may shift over time, and that what constitutes the middlebrow is often in the eye of the reader. Yet the study excludes a substantive examination of the conflicting ways these works and authors were read in their time. Here is where Holmes’s more literary approach, focused on close readings of texts in order to speculate what made a novel appealing, overtakes a historical lens that might have looked to archival documents, including reviews and other direct accounts. Although the literary prizes discussed in chapter six give us a certain window onto the judgments of a particular period, focusing on the winners in order to discern “at least some aspects of middlebrow taste” (p. 155) belies the complexity of the real life reading practices hoped to recover. Without attention to these internal debates, one cannot fully explore the shifting gender roles at work in how these texts were received.

In fact, the press, and in particular the women’s press, offers a detailed record of the conflicts surrounding these shifts, in particular during the Belle Epoque—the period Holmes designates as the birth of the middlebrow. That record clearly reveals that the Belle Epoque authors upon whom Holmes focuses—Marcelle Tinayre, Gabrielle Reval, Camille Pert, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Colette Yver, and Daniel Lesueur—were not seen as middlebrow at all. Rather, they were the product of a thriving new female-focused, highly influential, and quite elite literary milieu. It is especially problematic to group women under a term that did not exist when women writers at the time were consumed with the various terms for designating their newness and their difference from generations past, debating the aptness of the term feminist and pushing

against the label "*femme nouvelle*" often affixed to women writers. Indeed, this latter term offers an important case in point: like "middlebrow," it comes directly from the British, but in this instance, French culture actually adopted it, spinning it into a more ambivalent, often malicious cast. The achieving French women who saw themselves thrown into this category by the mainstream press largely rejected the term, refusing its facile label and labeling in general. In one of the novels at the center of Holmes' chapter, Tinayre's *La Rebelle*, the protagonist chafes at the terms her love interest deploys to describe her—rejecting "*la nouvelle femme*" (a variation of the "*femme nouvelle*") while distinguishing herself from "l'élite féminine, les 'affranchies', les 'rebelles'." [2] In other words, Belle Epoque women writers were skeptical about terms used to categorize them and worked hard to have a say in the matter.

But this study does not really explore the relationship between the subject matter addressed in the selected novels and the discursive conditions of their production. Despite a brief mention in passing and a later chapter on literary prizes, Holmes does not discuss the important role of writers like Tinayre, Lesueur, et al. in the birth of the enduring, widely influential Prix Femina—overlooking, then, the relationship between the questions women writers were exploring in their novels and their actual efforts to change the structures of intellectual authority. [3] In fact, the success of these writing women led to the widespread belief that women were on the cusp of making it into the hallowed halls of the Académie française.

In other words, in their place and time, the first "middlebrow" women writers were widely seen as approaching intellectual parity with men. This rich and complex historical moment is elided by the imposition of an ahistorical category that does not fully align with the circumstances. But the actual historic moment of the Belle Epoque offers a potential reframing of the "missing middlebrow" question of chapter four. When the women's press changed form after World War I, its tightknit Belle Epoque female literary community largely dispersed, even as its players continued to thrive: Tinayre and Delaure-Mardrus continued to write best-selling novels; the Prix Femina, with its all-women jury, endured. These are underexplored threads of French feminist literary history, concerning the very writers at the heart of Holmes' study. The pieces of these threads have the potential to be productively woven together; instead they are lost fragments in a scholarly framing that looks to other cultures and literary traditions to formulate the terms of analysis.

The fierce structures of French literary patriarchy have relegated women writers repeatedly to the margins, dismissing them, forcing them into categories that they resisted in various ways. While Holmes's goal of recognizing the importance of French women writers to modern French literary history is laudable, reclaiming these writers through this loose and shifting terminology belies the nuanced, differing ways through which they enacted that resistance throughout the twentieth century, in response to shifting cultural forces and changing circumstances. Holmes is right, of course, that works by women writers driven by questions of gender, sexuality, and work-life balance are no less relevant and meaningful than more familiar works by men. To understand French literature means to consider them all, just as to understand French history means to consider the colonies, women, and others whose voices have been marginalized. But the impact and importance of these voices cannot be measured by the relative pleasure they may have brought their readers—an impossible metric to recover. Rather, whenever possible, these writers should be understood on their own terms and in their own context, in relationship to the prevailing discursive and cultural forces of their time. In doing so, it is unlikely that we will emerge with a single category through which to better understand a century of women's popular

writing, but we might hope for a series of interlocking frames through which we can connect these overlooked authors to each other and to a wider French literary history.

NOTES

[1] Holmes is the author of six books, including *Colette* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991) and *Rachilde: Decadence, Gender, and the Woman Writer* (Oxford: Berg, 2001). She has also co-edited eight volumes, including *A Belle Epoque? Women in French Society and Culture 1890-1914* with Carrie Tarr (New York: Berghahn, 2006) and *French Feminisms 1975 and After* with Margaret Atack, Alison S. Fell, and Imogen Long (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017).

[2] Marcelle Tinayre, *La Rebelle* (1905; repr. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1906), p. 130.

[3] Other studies of women writers and literary prizes in the Belle Epoque include Margot Irvine, "The Role of Women's Magazines in the Creation of the Prix Vie Heureuse" in Annabelle Cone and Dawn Marley eds., *The Francophone Women's Magazine: Inside and Outside France* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2010), 23-31; Sylvie Ducas, "Le Prix Femina: La consécration littéraire au féminin." *Recherches Féministes* 16/1(2009): 43-95; and my own *Having it All in the Belle Epoque: How French Women Writers Invented the Modern Woman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

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