

H-France Review Vol. 19 (May 2019), No. 70

Rees, Kate. *The Journalist in the French Fin-de-siècle Novel: Enfants de la presse*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2018. xi + 232 pp. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-781886-51-9.

Review by Juliette M. Rogers, Macalester College.

Several recent studies have offered an examination of the figure of the newspaper and the press in French literature from the nineteenth century, including, for example, *Presses et plumes: Journalisme et littérature au XIXe siècle* by Marie-Ève Thérénty and Alain Vaillant, and *L'imaginaire médiatique: Histoire et fiction du journal au XIXe siècle* by Guillaume Pinson.[1] Kate Rees's book, *The Journalist in the French Fin-de-siècle Novel: Enfants de la presse*, adds a new facet to this growing body of criticism, because it focuses specifically on the figure of the journalist in French fiction from the period 1870 to 1910, allowing for a deeper inquiry into this subject during a moment in history when images of the writer-journalist and the press began to shift, both in literary representations and in the public eye. Furthermore, Rees's book is one of the first full-length studies on this topic to be published in English, thus expanding the potential readership.

Two of the main goals of the book are, as Rees states in the introduction, to investigate "the representation of the journalist in works of the period" and to "evaluate the novel's response to the increasingly powerful domain of journalism at the fin de siècle" (p. 1). To achieve these goals, Rees divides the discussion into five main chapters, covering a number of authors and novels and their differing approaches to representing journalists and the press. They are organized to follow a broad arc, moving, as Rees describes them, "from the satirical evaluation of journalism afforded by *Bel-Ami* through the ambiguities of Zola, to the heroization of [the] journalist and detective novel" (p. 13). Rees argues that these changes reflect a broader shift in nineteenth-century French literature, from earlier fiction that portrayed a contentious relationship between literature and journalism to later novels that characterized journalism as a meaningful pursuit for writers.

The first three chapters of the book focus primarily on one or two works by well-known authors, including Guy de Maupassant and his novel *Bel-Ami* (1885) in chapter one, Émile Zola and his novels *La Fortune des Rougon* (1871) and *Verité* (1903) in chapter two, and Jules Verne and his novels *Michel Strogoff* (1876) and *Claudius Bombarnac* (1893) in chapter three. Rees also examines the reporter or journalist of several lesser-known works, such as Paul Brulat's *Le Reporter* (1898), Félicien Champsaur's *Dinah Samuel* (1889), Charles Fenestrier's *La Vie des frelons: histoire d'un journaliste* (1908), and Pierre Giffard's *Le Sieur de Va-Partout* (1880). The analysis of these additional works offers the reader a glimpse into the diversity of fictional

journalists that existed during this time period and expands our understanding of the extent to which reporters and journalists pervaded the public and creative imaginations at the fin de siècle.

The fourth and fifth chapters continue to broaden our comprehension of the portrait of the journalist by delving into several works of popular fiction. Chapter four explores the character of the *journaliste policier*, or detective-reporter, for example, Fandor, in the *Fantômas* book series by Souvestre and Allain, and Rouletabille, who stars in Gaston Leroux's series of the same name, including one of his more popular novels, *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune* (1907). Chapter five finishes the volume with a brief survey of the "feminine" press, written for and by women during the fin-de-siècle period, along with several fictional women journalists involved in writing for these kinds of newspapers and magazines. One major example is Marcelle Tinayre's 1905 novel *La Rebelle*, which has been studied recently by a number of different critics, along with less well-known works by Camille Pert (*Leur égale*, 1899), Eugène Brioux (*La Femme seule*, 1912) and les frères Margueritte (*Femmes nouvelles*, 1899). Rees closes this last chapter with a return to Maupassant and to his portrait of Madeleine Forestier, the "hidden journalist" (p. 204) of *Bel-Ami*.

Rees's organization of the book allows for some common threads to wind through multiple chapters. For example, in chapter one, the framework involves a discussion of mirrors, echoes, and self-reflexivity in Maupassant's text. As Rees explains, the elements of literature and journalism mirror and reflect one another, but the lines between the two also become blurred, especially in works by Brulat and Fenestrier, but also in Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*. Rees's approach suggests a new reading of the important duel scene in *Bel-Ami* and brings new light to our understanding of the journalist in these texts.

Chapter two continues with a study of mirrors and echoes, this time in two Zola novels, but the analysis is organized around contrasts between one of Zola's earliest works, *La Fortune des Rougon*, and one of his last works, *Vérité*. To take one example, Rees explains that "the shift...in *Vérité* from the suspicious written word to the preferred oral forms of explanation can be seen as the inverse of the pattern described in *La Fortune des Rougon* which, in its symbolic representation of the production of narrative, suggested the journey from oral folklore to written forms" (p. 84). The transitions in Zola's portraits of the journalist and the press reflect in part his own changing relationship with journalism over time. Rees's discussion of Zola's important "Adieux" article, published in 1881, is juxtaposed with Zola's journalistic production at the end of the century during the Dreyfus Affair.

With chapter three, we find a shift from mirrors and echoes to an evaluation of the rise of *la presse d'information* during the fin-de-siècle period, as opposed to earlier versions of *la presse d'opinion* (p. 97). Rees shows that this emphasis on facts and information brought with it a heightened attention to the eyewitness account and to observational reports, that is, to the importance of the visual in journalism. However, as Rees reveals, there is a simultaneous "denigration of the visual" (p. 99) that occurs, and that collapses the oppositions between factual and fictional or between newspaper and novel. For example, what Verne's novel *Claudius Bombarnac* does "in its virtuoso display of the failings of the reporter, and the failings of the real, is to enable the reader at all times to 'see'... privileging the reader's capacities for perception even while the act of seeing comes under scrutiny" (p. 127). Thus, Verne's portrayal

of journalists does not always support their pursuit of factual evidence and in fact encourages the creative or the fictional as well.

The beginning of chapter four offers a new image for the journalist character, as Rees outlines the ways in which the detective-reporter of early twentieth-century crime fiction is often presented as heroic, rather than as the buffoon or the bumbling fool we saw in Verne's novels in the preceding chapter or as the "poisonous" purveyors of lies seen in the conservative newspapers of Zola's *Vérité* in chapter two. However, Rees does continue to make connections here with previous chapters, explaining that, even as they "celebrate the dynamism of modern reportage" these detective-reporters also "playfully cast doubt on the business of journalism" (p. 164). While their roles are certainly depicted as more valiant than those of their earlier counterparts, these journalists also question the foundations of their work.

Chapter five considers not so much the distinctions between oral and written or literary and journalistic seen in previous chapters, but rather the public and private concerns of each fictional female journalist. Each of the texts studied includes a heroine who is absorbed with her work as a journalist, but also with private decisions—whether or not to marry or to have a lover, for example—and how those decisions about her private life will affect her work as a journalist. However, Rees does return to the idea discussed in earlier chapters that these novels about journalists, written by journalists, are self-reflexive (p. 183). To conclude chapter five, Rees chooses to contrast the women reporters working for the feminine press with Madeleine Forestier of *Bel-Ami*. Although she is not officially a member of the *Vie française* staff, she has all the qualities of a professional journalist, with her "capacity for engaging a reader, structuring an article, extracting crucial information from an interviewee" (p. 204). Madeleine's talents are used to promote her husband's work for the male-focused *Vie française* newspaper, and Maupassant is generally not considered a "feminist" author. Yet Rees argues convincingly that Madeleine's journalistic production in *Bel-Ami* can be read as a form of *écriture féminine* as described by Hélène Cixous.

Overall, Rees's study is meticulously researched and includes references to a great body of scholarship written on these authors and texts and on the French press. It also demonstrates a significant engagement with a large swath of literary theory, with connections made at various moments in the book to Baudrillard, Bakhtin, Bloom, Cixous, Deleuze, Debord, Jameson, Suleiman, and others. Given all of these references to so many different secondary sources and critical theories, the author's own voice and argument occasionally seem muted or lost in the multitude. On the whole, though, *The Journalist in the French Fin-de-siècle Novel: Enfants de la presse* contributes an excellent new analysis of the figure of the journalist in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French fiction. It will be a significant guide for future studies of the French press and the French journalist, and it serves as a reminder of the historical importance of journalists and the press, especially in today's world of "fake news" campaigns and anti-media attacks that aim to silence the essential role of journalists in our society.

NOTES

[1] Marie-Eve Thérénty and Alain Vaillant, *Presses et plumes: Journalisme et littérature au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Éditions, 2004); Guillaume Pinson, *L'imaginaire médiatique: Histoire et fiction du journal au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013).

Juliette M. Rogers
Macalester College
jmrogers@macalester.edu

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172