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Dantzel Cenatiempo
University of Washington, dantzel4@gmail.com

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Abstract

Review of Diana Holmes. *Middlebrow Matters: Women's reading and the literary canon in France since the Belle Époque*. Liverpool UP, 2018. 222 pp.

Keywords

middlebrow, Belle Époque, France, women's writing, Diana Holmes, Colette, Françoise Sagan, Marie N'Diaye

Diana Holmes. *Middlebrow Matters: Women's reading and the literary canon in France since the Belle Époque*. Liverpool UP, 2018. 222 pp.

Diana Holmes has been known for decades of scholarship on women's writing and the Belle Époque. In *Middlebrow Matters*, she again deploys this expertise to produce the first book-length study of French middlebrow literature. Middlebrow is an ambiguous, neglected genre that mainstream literary culture in France has persistently devalued and underestimated due to its associations with bourgeois womanhood. But Holmes underscores the genre's value and meticulously describes its ability to combine traditionally high literary forms with the accessibility, mimetic storylines, and commercial appeal of lowbrow mass-market books. These factors make the French middlebrow uniquely suited to Holmes's analysis of gender and cultural prestige throughout the Belle Époque, the interwar period, and beyond.

Holmes begins by acknowledging the marginalized, complex positionality of middlebrow writing. A key feature of her analysis is the connection she draws between French middlebrow's Belle Époque origins and its continuing legacy in the largely female-written and female-read middlebrow novels of contemporary France. Indeed, middlebrow's rare capacity for appealing to readers across supposedly discrete time periods and literary categories is one of the book's major themes. Holmes traces middlebrow's ability to bridge the presumed divide between masculinized notions of intellectual high literature and the supposedly feminized (and thus debased) sentimentality of lower-class popular novels.

The fact that most middlebrow authors and readers have been women is thus significant. Holmes devotes her first chapter to rehabilitating both the middlebrow and its feminized associations in wider culture, pointing out that although a masculine middlebrow does exist, it is nevertheless a primarily feminine genre written by and for women. She contextualizes French middlebrow by comparing it with the better-known Anglophone middlebrow and provides an extensive socio-historical background to explain the previous lack of scholarly work on French middlebrow literature. Holmes is especially skilled at conveying the complexities of a genre that is loose, prone to shifting, and thus highly context-specific. Despite these ambiguities, she also argues in defense of a more or less stable "middlebrow poetics" (3) that can be recognized across most periods.

Holmes spends several pages analyzing and defending the narratological and psychological processes of middlebrow "immersivity," providing a useful initial framework for her audience. She then narrows in on specific literary and historical aspects of French middlebrow women's writing. She examines the economic and social factors that facilitated its emergence in Belle Époque France, comparing prominent male authors of the genre with their female counterparts, in particular Daniel Lesueur and Marcelle Tinayre. This is followed by a chapter that

investigates Colette's unique position as a widely recognized feminine writer of fiction who nevertheless achieved high cultural legitimacy within her lifetime. Holmes rereads Colette to reclaim her as a middlebrow author whose paradoxical canonization and continued underestimation provide a lens for understanding the quandary of middlebrow's interstitial status.

The last four chapters in particular are designed to provide a wider lens on the middlebrow and its legacy. Holmes investigates, in turn, the inter-war French literary scene and its middle-class readership. Where there are historical gaps, Holmes uses existing material—publication statistics, the regional distribution of lending libraries, and other such demographic information—to reconstruct what the average publicly educated middlebrow reader would have consumed. She then turns her attention to the 1950s and 60s, framing Françoise Sagan as a prominent middlebrow author whose early novels were often criticized as superficial. But Holmes convincingly argues that along with the mimetic and immersive qualities that may have led some to see it as shallow, Sagan's work also deals with deeper political, ethical, and social questions, a combination that marks it as middlebrow. Echoing this investigation of Sagan's ambiguous cultural impact, Holmes engages in Chapter 7 with Marie N'Diaye's *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009), examining the work itself alongside related online forums. Holmes presents N'Diaye as a contemporary case study of a "high culture" author's perceived "descent" into middlebrow fiction, showing how critics who misunderstand or denigrate the middlebrow have been similarly unable to come to terms with N'Diaye's more accessible work.

This tension between mass appeal and intellectual purity also emerges in the French literary prize process, revealing the fraught commercial-versus-cultural debate in France. It is an unpleasant dilemma for authors whose work often finds new readerships after winning a popular literary award, but who are also painfully aware that elite critics will view it as less valuable precisely because of its sudden mass commercial appeal. Holmes recasts this potentially negative cultural tension as an opportunity to circumvent high culture's literary gatekeepers. On the one hand, readers' participation in the selection process of popular prize-winning novels is a crucial way for more women to make their opinions heard. On the other hand, as Holmes skillfully argues, a popular literary prize also invites new audiences to appreciate and interpret female authors who otherwise would be overlooked or considered avant-garde or "difficult."

It is fitting, then, that Holmes's book won the Modern Language Association's 2019 Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize. The honor is well deserved. In *Middlebrow Matters*, Holmes has successfully reclaimed a neglected yet important segment of French literary tradition and reframed it for current and future scholars of literary history, women's studies and textual studies. Holmes is uniquely skilled at balancing the narrative and evidentiary demands of her project,

convincingly arguing that middlebrow literature's in-between qualities are "salutary" (222) and deserve further consideration, while also expertly challenging the historical devaluation of those qualities. *Middlebrow Matters* is, in Holmes's signature style, both rigorously researched and pleasant to read. Like the hybridized, female-focused middlebrow it analyzes, this book too "connects, bridges and unites" (30).

Dantzel Cenatiempo
University of Washington