Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series, 1917-1955 by Lise Jaillant (review)

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Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series, 1917–1955. Lise Jaillant. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014. Pp. 224. $99.00 (cloth).

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With a refreshing directness, Jaillant's first sentence summarizes her entire book. It will, she writes, "examine the evolution of cultural categories in early- to mid-twentieth-century America through the study of the Modern Library, a cheap reprint series created in New York in 1917" (1). It is the "through" that is key here: across six varied chapters, Jaillant uses the case study of the Modern Library as a unifying point of focus, one from which she explores not only cultural categorization but also wider issues of censorship, taste, class, literary celebrity, and the role of both publishing and academia in canonization. Grounded in extensive archival work throughout, the study moves effortlessly from the specific to the general, giving readers both an extensive knowledge of this understudied reprint series and an insight into the social, economic, and cultural contexts which shaped its production, marketing, and reception.

Most importantly, it is through close attention to how the Modern Library selected and promoted its texts that Jaillant makes her central case: that interwar America was characterized by a "flexibility of cultural categories" in

which James Joyce could be published alongside detective stories, and H. G. Wells next to Darwinian theory (17). As they were numbered consecutively, such diverse texts were not only published at the same time but were displayed, advertised, and often reviewed together as texts of equal value. The Modern Library did not distinguish between science and literature, or popular and modernist fiction; rather, it was explicitly promoted as a "uniform series" (20), one which readers could "Fall Back upon" (29). Readers could be assured that every volume in the Modern Library was a "gem": all equally intelligent, enjoyable, and modern. It was only in the late 1930s and early 1940s, with fears of cultural contamination and the increasing academicization of literature, that American critics began to construct Andreas Huyssen's (in)famous "Great Divide" between "high" and "low" cultural forms.

For scholars of the British "Battle of the Brows," this statement may come as a surprise, but Jaillant's exhaustively researched and succinctly argued account is persuasive. She uses unpublished records and correspondence, as well as articles from American regional newspapers, to demonstrate that, unlike their British counterparts, American publishers, readers, and reviewers seldom found qualitative differences between works that today are viewed as either low-, middle-, or highbrow. Indeed, in her introduction, she casts the Modern Library as a "middlebrow institution that sold literary texts

to a wide audience" (5), one which saw no contradiction in marketing texts as both a "literary masterpiece and a POPULAR book" (85). The interwar difference between the two nations, she argues, was due to their different class systems; in the United States there was "no upper-class literary establishment" to rail against the rise of the working and middle classes, or, equally, for those rising masses to rail against (97). As a result, self-proclaimed "highbrow" writers such as Virginia Woolf were able, in America, to adopt a different, more "dialogic" relationship with their readers.

Jaillant's chapter on Woolf, then, is characteristic of her project as a whole. In it, she focuses on Woolf's overlooked introduction to the Modern Library edition of Mrs. Dalloway (1928), asking what this particular moment can tell us about the development and reception of modernism. She is interested in a "transatlantic Woolf," one who celebrated the ordinary, "unprofessional" reader, and, in doing so, moved from an "elite readership to a large audience" (91). As in the rest of the book, she concentrates on a book's paratextual elements (prefaces, design, display, advertising, reviews, etc.) to illuminate the interconnections between writer, text, editor, publisher, and public. This is where the book's strengths lie: the study is at its best when considering advertising and marketing strategies, and is consequently peppered with wonderful quotes throughout, such as the invention of the word "stagnuck" to describe a Philistine

immune to the charm of reprint libraries: "Don't be a Stagnuck. Read every book in The Modern Library" (28), or the assertion that "Any book buyer who overlooks this excellent series . . . should apply for a mental guardian" (44).

This focus on advertisements, as well as sales figures, publishing agreements and images of book jackets and window displays make Jaillant's first book a seemingly perfect fit for Kate Macdonald and Ann Rea's Literary Texts and the Popular Marketplace series. The study interweaves elements of cultural, social, and book history with literary theory and analysis to produce a cohesive and tightly focused monograph. The author considers how cover design affected the reception of texts, and in particular how the "sexy" covers designed for Faulkner's Sanctuary in the late 1940s compounded its image as a sensational potboiler, especially on the academic market. Once again, she argues that it was primarily academia that refused to believe that bestselling texts could also be literary (and vice versa), but she goes on to note that academia was an important market for modernist writers. Packaged and marketed correctly, cheap and readily available paperbacks could ensure a writer's place in the literary canon. In her chapter on Sherwood Anderson, for instance, she shows that his eagerness to capture the academic market by offering education discounts, allowing his stories to appear in anthologies, and giving talks at universities all

contributed to his transition from "literary sensation to canonical writer" (51).

Not all writers were so amenable to academic or mass markets. Willa Cather's snobbish, elitist attitude towards the masses is much more recognizably "modernist," and yet Jaillant reveals the economic motives lurking behind her decision to withdraw permission for cheap reprints. Although Cather expressed a preference for "fewer readers and better readers," this preference was largely due to the "dignified royalty" that the more expensive editions could provide (Cather qtd. on 115). These editions were too expensive to be included on academic syllabi; as a consequence, Cather "privileged her short-term economic interests over her long-term position in the literary canon" (104).

Consistently insightful, surprising, and concise, Jaillant's book makes an important contribution to both modernist and middlebrow studies. Without effacing the differences between the two spheres, Jaillant uses the example of the Modern Library to show that there were overlaps between high- and middlebrow culture. She reminds us that such categories were socially constructed; thus her work highlights the importance of studying modern or modernist texts in specific temporal and geographical contexts. This, perhaps, is Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon's greatest strength: it aims to "recover a forgotten moment in the history of modernism—the moment when 'high' modernist texts

were sufficiently attractive to be reprinted in a cheap series, but had not yet been dissociated from 'lesser' works" (4). It is this focus on these in-between moments—when "modernist" texts were yet to be fully classified as high or low—that allows Jaillant to offer new perspectives on both canonical and non-canonical texts. As we move towards the centenary of modernism's annus mirabilis, Jaillant's book implores us to consider the many other "moments" of modernism, and, in doing so, to deepen our knowledge of its transatlantic reception and legacy.