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Article:

Holmes, D orcid.org/0000-0001-9079-3582 (2016) *Literary Prizes, Women, and the Middlebrow*. *Contemporary French Civilization*, 41 (3-4). pp. 437-448. ISSN 0147-9156

<https://doi.org/10.3828/cfc.2016.29>

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Diana Holmes

Literary Prizes, Women and the Middlebrow

Annual literary prizes began life in 1903 in France, with the founding of the Prix Goncourt, and they have proliferated there even more than in other nations (Ducas 2013). Yet the prize is not always greeted by its recipient with unalloyed joy: an “antiprize rhetoric” (English 212) is part of the standard response, for to win the Goncourt, for example, “tient à la fois du banc d’infamie et de la légion d’Honneur” (Ducas 183). Though of immense advantage to an author’s career and financial fortunes, prizes are tainted not only by the cynical assumption of a corrupt relationship between publishing houses and juries, but also by the incompatibility between the image of the writer as solitary, authentic and aesthetically ahead of their time, and the fact that prizes mean a large mainstream readership. Prizes, in other words, are demeaningly middlebrow. Women, unsurprisingly, have formed a small minority of prize winners, and when they do win their response tends to be more welcoming than that of their male counterparts. The history of women and prizes, including the women-only jury of the Prix Femina (1905) and the readers’ jury of the Prix des Lectrices de Elle (1969), form the context of this article. Countering the dominant view of prizes, particularly the “feminine” prizes, as favoring a “réalisme accessible au grand public” incompatible with the authentically literary, I use analysis of two (not untypical) twenty-first century winners of, respectively, the Femina (Léonora Miano’s *La Saison de l’Ombre*, 2013) and the Grand Prix des Lectrices de Elle (Claudie Gallay’s *Les Déferlantes*, 2008) to argue that these can also be sites of the “middlebrow” in a much more positive sense of the word. That is, prizes may consecrate and promote fiction that combines the page-turning pleasure of immersive fiction with serious exploration of historical and ethical concerns, through writing that is at once accessible and formally inventive.

Les prix littéraires annuels sont nés en France en 1903 avec la création du prix Goncourt. Depuis lors, ils se sont multipliés, tout particulièrement dans leur pays d’origine. Pour autant, leurs récipiendaires ne les accueillent pas toujours avec une joie sans mélange, l’expression d’une satisfaction mitigée est de bon ton car gagner le Goncourt, par exemple, “tient à la fois du banc d’infamie et de la Légion d’Honneur” (Ducas 183). Bien qu’ils représentent un avantage professionnel et financier considérable, la réputation des prix est entachée de suspicions de collusion entre les éditeurs et les jurys et par l’incompatibilité supposée entre l’image de l’auteur solitaire, authentique et avant-gardiste et la médiatisation grand public qui accompagne ces distinctions à des fins commerciales. Autrement dit, les prix font déplorablement “culture moyenne”. On ne trouvera pas surprenant que les femmes ne constituent qu’une petite minorité des lauréats de prix littéraires ni qu’elles aient tendance à accueillir leurs rares succès avec un plaisir plus évident que les hommes. Cet article s’inscrit dans le contexte de l’histoire des rapports entre les femmes et les prix littéraires, dont le phénomène des jurys féminins du Femina (1905) et du grand prix des lectrices de Elle (1969) constitue un élément important. A l’opposé de l’opinion dominante qui voudrait que les prix, notamment les prix féminins, promeuvent “un réalisme accessible au grand public” qui serait à l’opposé d’une littérature authentique, cet article s’appuie sur les analyses de deux lauréates récentes, Leonora Miano, prix Femina 2013 avec *La Saison de l’Ombre* et Claudia Gallay,

grand prix des lectrices de Elle 2008 avec *Les Déferlantes*, pour montrer que ces œuvres contribuent positivement à la “culture moyenne”. Ces prix peuvent en effet consacrer des livres qui associent le plaisir de tourner fiévreusement les pages en s’immergeant dans la fiction et des réflexions d’ordre éthique ou historique profondes grâce à une écriture à la fois innovante dans la forme tout en restant accessible.

Annual literary prizes, most famously the Goncourt, are a vital and highly visible part of French cultural life. A prize, though, is not always greeted by its recipient with unalloyed joy: an “antiprize rhetoric” (English 212) is part of the standard response, and to win the Goncourt, for many authors, “tient à la fois du banc d’infamie et de la légion d’Honneur” (Ducas, *La Littérature* 183). Though of immense advantage to an author’s career and financial fortunes, prizes are tainted not only by the cynical assumption of a corrupt relationship between publishing houses and juries, but also by the incompatibility between the image of the writer as solitary, authentic and aesthetically ahead of their time, and the fact that prizes mean media attention, material rewards, and a large mainstream readership. Underlying the unease about becoming a prize winner is a sentiment that dates at least from Flaubert. He wrote to Louise Colet in 1846: “Il y a des génies énormes qui n’ont qu’un défaut, qu’un vice, c’est d’être sentis surtout par les esprits vulgaires, par les cœurs à poésie facile” (Flaubert 363). This sentiment has been echoed many times by prize laureates, for example Jacques Borel, reluctant winner of the 1965 Goncourt for his novel *L’Adoration*: “Il y a des gens qui, je suppose, achètent chaque année les prix littéraires. Mais ça ce sont les gens qui n’entrent qu’une fois par an dans une librairie!” (Heinich 28). “Esprits vulgaires,” “cœurs à poésie facile”, readers dependent on established arbiters of taste for their choice of reading material: we are on the territory of the middlebrow. Literary prizes (particularly in France) are at once

crucial to the book trade and to the vitality of literature as a cultural form, and seen as demeaningly, deplorably middlebrow.

“Middlebrow” is a useful but contested concept that requires definition.¹ It is not a complimentary term. First recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1925, “middlebrow” was coined with a sneer, to mean not just “somewhere between highbrow and lowbrow,” but rather a type of culture that lacks the dignity of the high and is not even redeemed by the colorful if vulgar energy of the low. It suggests a form of art that is second rate, mediocre, imitative, middle-of-the-road, a literature that reaffirms commonsensical truths, that conforms and reassures rather than contests or opens new horizons. The French have no term for this category of culture, at least not one as resonant as “middlebrow” (“culture moyenne” is the nearest), and so far in France little critical attention has been paid to it as a phenomenon. My argument, though, is that due to the particular configuration of the French cultural sphere, and the strong identification of -- in particular -- literary culture with national identity itself, disparagement of middlebrow reading has been more marked and more potent in France than elsewhere. High literature, or what Bourdieu terms the field of restricted production (Bourdieu), values the difficult, the demanding, the experimental -- and accords respect primarily to philosophies of sceptical pessimism. Mainstream taste, reading for leisure (part of Bourdieu’s field of large-scale production), tends rather towards narrative techniques that are familiar hence relatively transparent, towards novels that create compellingly immersive fictional worlds, and that offer at least some measure of optimism. When Sylvie Ducas describes the Goncourt as “une sorte de tribunal bienfaisant du lisible sanctionnant une littérature accessible pour le plus grand nombre” (*La Littérature* 181), she has no need to specify that this is a negatively critical view of the prize: the very term “lisible,” evokes for most of her

readers Barthes' famous distinction between the transformative brilliance of the authentically literary "scriptible" text, and the merely enjoyable, decidedly second-rate "readable" (Barthes 558 and passim)

Implicit in this structuring hierarchy of taste is a sense of gendered difference: though there is of course something we might term a "masculine middlebrow," the middlebrow tends to be identified more with the feminine. First, the general reading public is imagined as feminine in its swooning preference for being "carried away by a story," as opposed to the highbrow or intellectual reader whose preference for a formally demanding text suggests a more cerebral, active and virile stance. Second, the fact is that the majority of novel readers actually are women: Olivier Donnat's surveys of French cultural practices show fiction reading to have become steadily more feminized over the past half century, to the extent that by 2008, women made up an estimated 75% of novel readers (Donnat, *Pratiques culturelles* 9-15). But despite this chain of association between prizes, middlebrow and women, very few women win the big literary prizes. A 2011 study by the Observatoire des Inégalités found that since the beginning of the 20th century only 16% of prizes awarded had gone to women; only 10% of Goncourt winners have been female authored, less than 15% for the Renaudot prize, and prize juries have been overwhelmingly male. On the rare occasions that they do win, women writers tend to be much less ambivalent about the honour conferred upon them. Since women's legitimacy in the cultural field has always been fragile and contested, female winners tend to welcome the recognition that a prize represents, both as individuals and as members of the female sex. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, winner of the 1954 Goncourt for *Les Mandarins*, expressed caution about the impact of media stardom on a writer's relationship to truth, but acknowledged nonetheless her utter exhilaration at the expansion of her readership

that the prize would bring: “dans les moments où s’accomplit le rêve de mes vingt ans -- me faire aimer à travers les livres -- rien ne me gâche mon plaisir” (Beauvoir 338). Annie Ernaux was equally jubilant when she won the Prix Renaudot in 1984 for *La Place*, particularly in view of her double lack of cultural legitimacy as a woman of working class origin: “C’est une victoire personnelle, mais ça a aussi été une revanche de type féministe pour moi, c’est sûr [...] une petite réparation, au moins dans l’ordre du symbolique, ou du littéraire” (Heinich 100). Marie Ndiaye, characteristically understated but still wholly positive about her 2009 Goncourt for *Trois femmes puissantes*, declared herself “très contente” and replied in the affirmative to her interviewer’s questions about the significance of the prize for women as a whole: “c’est très important, ce n’est pas insignifiant” (Ndiaye).

The question of gender has been interwoven with the prize system from the outset. When the ten male members of the Goncourt Academy, set up to award the inaugural prize in 1903, refused to take seriously the only female entry (Myriam Harry with *La Conquête de Jérusalem*), twenty-two of the most prominent women writers and intellectuals of the period established their own prize, the Prix Femina, awarded annually ever since by a women-only jury. Funding and publicity came from that most middlebrow of sources, the upmarket women’s magazine: *Vie heureuse* and a little later *Femina* provided the prize money and featured the prize extensively in their widely read pages. The association between “feminine” prizes and women’s magazines was echoed and amplified many decades later in 1969 when *Elle* magazine -- also an upmarket, glossy, self-consciously modern women’s journal -- set up the Grand Prix des Lectrices de *Elle*, judged by juries composed of readers themselves. *Femina* and *Elle* prizes, judged by women, show a much more even gender balance in

the authors of winning novels: over 40% of Femina prizes have been awarded to women, exactly 50% for Elle.

The involvement of women's magazines in the two major women-centred prizes reinforces the suspicion of literary awards as market-led and irredeemably middlebrow. Sylvie Ducas (broadly sympathetic to the prize system and to women's attempts to find a place within it) nonetheless reflects what we might term France's modernist prejudice, when she accuses the Femina judges of "réticences esthétiques ou morales, qui les confinent dans une littérature de convention, souvent peu audacieuse" (Ducas, "Le Prix Femina" 71) and laments the general tendency of prizes to reward a "réalisme moyen accessible au grand public" that conforms to an "esthétique révolue" (72,73). It is this type of critical discourse -- so pervasive in France as to be hegemonic -- that I want to question. France labors under the consensual rejection of what we might broadly term narrative realism. This can be read through a Bourdieusian framework as the consequence of social and gendered hierarchies of power -- it has certainly led to what Todorov and others have identified as a yawning gap between academic and "high cultural" understanding of the nature and value of literature, and that of the vast majority of what Todorov terms "non-professional readers" (24). In the "serious" press and media and in academic discourse, what dominates is a reductive view of immersive, mimetic fiction as tired, outdated, hackneyed, and fraudulent -- a view heavily dependent on New Novel theory of the 1950s. The death of the novel as a fictional story-telling genre is regularly announced in public discourse on culture in France, as exemplified by a 2011 article "La Fin du roman," published in the serious weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Here the well regarded contemporary writer Philippe Forest, a practitioner of what is possibly now the dominant French literary genre of

fictionalized autobiography, dismissed the mainstream novel (“réalisme moyen”) as a genre “en coma dépassé,” an affair of “vieilles formules avec lesquelles, sous couvert d’imagination, l’auteur refourgue les mêmes intrigues stéréotypées avec des personnages de papier mâché dans des décors en trompe-l’œil”. This devaluing of the novel’s capacity to create imaginary worlds underpins the dismissive view of literary prizes as promoters of mediocrity, and I think it is worth contesting.

It is of course perfectly possible to point to years where prize juries -- including the women-only ones -- have made choices that seem to reward ponderous narrative techniques and pedestrian style over more adventurous contenders. 1958 would be a case in point for the Femina: Françoise Mallet-Joris’ positively Balzacian *L’Empire céleste* won against more stylistically and thematically challenging contenders that have worn the test of time considerably better, notably Duras’s *Moderato Cantabile* and Rochefort’s *Le Repos du guerrier*. But far more often, the Femina and the Elle have selected novels that combine thematic depth and formal skill with appeal to a wide reading public: Anne Hébert, Sylvie Germain, Camille Laurens, Marie Ndiaye, Nancy Huston are among the Femina winners since 1980; Nancy Huston again, Véronique Ovaldé, Philippe Grimbert, Kathryn Stockett, and William Boyd have been chosen by Elle readers. In relation to the middlebrow, prizes do two things. They promote and respect the type of fiction patronized or ignored by the gatekeepers of literary standards. Or they can make available to a wider audience texts that might have been thought too “highbrow” for a pleasurable read, but that do in fact reward an immersive, identificatory reading. In both cases, commercially successful prize-winning novels tend to exemplify what I am trying to define in a positive sense as a “middlebrow poetics” of the novel.

If I am going to claim something as weighty as a “poetics” then this clearly demands a degree of theorising that is beyond the scope of a short article, though forms part of a larger project. In the present context, I will briefly outline some key elements that characterize successful middlebrow fiction throughout the past century and more, before turning to two specific examples of prize-winning novels.

Middlebrow novels, then, tend to address “serious” issues -- social, psychological, emotional -- that matter to a contemporary readership, but to do so through a form of fiction that is immersive, compellingly plotted, and spatially located in a way that transports the reader to a vividly imagined other place. Immersivity refers to fiction’s capacity to offer a sense of entrancement, of being conveyed to an imaginary world grounded mimetically in our own lived experience yet foreign or “other,” because more intense, coherent, and compelling than the messy contingency of everyday reality. Immersion also involves the provisional adoption of another, fictional subjectivity, an empathetic foray into a consciousness that is not our own. Effective plotting is part of this: rarely a criterion of high literary value,² a good plot is nonetheless central to the satisfaction of novel reading for most readers, because it both satisfies the need to impose or discover pattern, order and meaning, and through narrative twists and turns registers reality’s defiance of that need. Ricoeur’s term “concordance discordante” (139) captures this well. The centrality of place, or the compelling creation through words of a particular geography, seems also to be central to most of the fiction that attracts a large “general” readership, and is a feature that separates the middlebrow novel from genre or series fiction. Where Harlequin romances, or in France the hugely popular fiction of Marc Levy or Philippe Musso, are all set in a generic, minimally described modernity, the middlebrow novel conjures up specific locations, at once material and metaphorical. Arguably,

middlebrow fiction provides a pleasurable means to address the socially charged and unstable geography of the contemporary world. Two very different examples of twenty-first century prize winners will help to demonstrate the variety and the common features of contemporary feminine middlebrow.

Claudie Gallay's *Les Déferlantes* won the Elle prize in 2009 for a 500-page novel that exemplifies what might be -- and has been -- termed the good holiday read.³ With a plot that combines the investigative pleasures of the detective genre with quietly intense romance, the first-person narrative voice of a dour but likeable heroine at a turning point in her life, and a vivid sense of place, *Les Déferlantes* became a huge bestseller, nationally and internationally (it has been translated into seventeen languages), and was adapted for French television in 2013.

The unnamed narrator/heroine of *Les Déferlantes* begins the novel in a state of utter grief caused by the death of her lover some months previously. She has adopted a place -- the small port of La Hague on the tip of the Cotentin peninsula in Normandy -- that registers on the senses the emotional bleakness she feels. La Hague is "un endroit comme un bout du monde" (11), exposed to the elements, with its wild, desolate shoreline and raging seas. But La Hague is also the site of a human community, into which comes a stranger who -- through a well-trying and familiar narrative device -- sets off the novel's two, interwoven lines of plot: a love story, through which the narrator will slowly and painfully return to life, and a mystery, for the new arrival is gradually revealed to be a man whose past is closely entwined with La Hague and with the lives of its inhabitants. As a series of clues turn into revelations, the truth of the past comes to light and the possibility of a future for the narrator is gradually realized. Suspense and curiosity produce the desire to turn the pages, and so too does the reader's identification with a narrator petrified by sadness

but increasingly attentive to the presence of others and particularly of this new other whose significance for the plot is immediately signalled by the novel's opening words: "La première fois que j'ai vu Lambert ..." (9)

The dull, clipped spareness of the narrative voice is, I believe, an essential part of the novel's wide appeal. Her short sentences, abstention from imagery and all but the most generic of adjectives ["le ciel était noir, très bas" (9)], combine to place the reader inside a state of emotional anomie, from which slow emergence then becomes pleasurable. We are invited to occupy another subjectivity, and as the narrator's numbed impassivity gradually gives way to curiosity, empathy and desire, so the small world of La Hague comes alive and the stories of individual characters mesh to produce a coherent if multi-stranded narrative, supported by a dense network of themes and imagery. If the proximity of death remains present throughout, with repeated motifs of loss, drowning, shrouds, and burials, the themes of rebirth and revival typify the fundamental optimism of the middlebrow. The heroine's renaissance is echoed in a discrete but insistent set of images: many of the houses in La Hague are constructed from wood reclaimed from shipwrecks; damaged animals are saved and restored; wounds heal; one character succeeds in restoring and launching a derelict boat; the sculptor Raphael creates beauty through figures that represent extremes of human suffering: "faire du juste avec l'injuste, de la passion avec la misère" (191). Raphael introduces a quietly self-reflexive theme into the novel: plot-driven and grounded in the familiar genres of the romance and the family drama, *Les Déferlantes* also unostentatiously reflects on the redemptive possibilities of art and language in a number of ways. One of these is the referencing of two French writers, Jacques Prévert and Françoise Sagan, both associated with the

Cotentin area, but also both authors who combined artistic seriousness with accessibility to a mass public.

It must already be apparent that place is also crucial to the success of *Les Déferlantes*. The novel provides a compellingly graphic portrayal of a very particular landscape, concentrating the action within a small location. The sense of immersion in the fictional world is created in part through the graphic depiction of a desolate landscape besieged by the elements, and threatened too by human intervention through the looming profile of the power station just along the coast. As the narrator regains some small sense of agency and desire, so the narrative space opens beyond the place that provides the objective correlative for her grief: she travels a little way up the coast with Lambert, goes to Caen to discuss a return to normal work, makes a trip south to a different region of France. The all-consuming intensity of the place “like the end of the world” is relativized within a wider canvas. The novel provides a positive example of that much denigrated “réalisme moyen accessible au grand public” (Ducas, “Prix Femina” 72), enabling the vicarious working through of grief and renewal, as the narrator’s numbed impassivity gradually gives way to curiosity about the world around her, empathy for others, and desire to risk a new relationship.

Leonora Miano’s *La Saison de l’Ombre* is very different case of the middlebrow: a highly literary historical novel, it was brought to the attention of a general or popular readership in part through the award of the Prix Femina in 2013. *La Saison de l’Ombre* was the first novel by a francophone African writer to win the Femina: Miano is Cameroonian, though resident in France. This was her seventh novel, and though she had won prizes before (including the Prix Goncourt des lycéens for *Contours du jour qui vient* in 2006), the Femina provided her with a degree of media coverage and bookshop display that radically raised her profile. Miano’s novel

is far from the “littérature de convention, peu audacieuse” (Ducas, “Le Prix Femina” 56) that Ducas associates in particular with women’s prizes: set in the seventeenth century, in pre-colonial Cameroon, *La Saison de l’Ombre* is focalized by protagonists whose worldview is radically unfamiliar, not least in their merging of the natural and the supernatural. But by proposing the novel as one that could be read with pleasure by “non-specialists,” the prize illuminated the text’s “middlebrow” qualities, for in fact it also offers an accessible form of narrative realism, vivid and suspenseful plotting and a powerful sense of place.

The novel is set in Central Africa in the early days of the transatlantic slave trade, seen from the point of view of “ceux dont on ne dit jamais rien,” as Miano herself puts it (Simon) or those who lost loved ones to slavery. Told from the perspective of the Mulongo, a small clan living at some distance from the coast, for whom the world extends no further than the neighbouring Bwele tribe at a day’s travel across the bush, it recounts the disappearance of ten Mulongo boys and two adult men after a raid on the village, and the subsequent search to recover them that takes the mother of one of the lost boys as far as the hitherto unknown ocean. The mystery of the boys’ disappearance sets off journeys beyond the Mulongo’s known world, and leads at last to the discovery of their fate, sold to slavers and now either transported or, in the case of those who resisted, dead. But the event also triggers a questioning of the clan’s structures of power and authority, including the ways in which these are gendered.

The reader enters the fictional world not through a single subjectivity, as in *Les Déferlantes*, but through a varied system of focalisation that sustains the sense of a world whose parameters are very different from our own. The integration of the supernatural into the natural, the absence of any sense of a larger map of Africa or the

world -- these are elements that carry readers out of their familiar sense of reality, whilst love and loyalty, friendship, the obstinate quest to find a missing child connect more directly with a contemporary sensibility. In a way that bears some comparison with *Les Déferlantes*, the bleakness of a story that opens on to loss, destruction, and bereavement, in this case on a massive historical scale, is offset by imagery of hope, human resourcefulness and renewal. The clan's women, most prominent among the novel's focalizers, accede to a stronger sense of their own agency as the story proceeds. On the road to the coast, the main heroine Eyabe is given refuge by the *Bebayedi*, a heterogeneous community of runaways and refugees from the slavers, all of different tribes and cultures. This new community is in the process of creating a new culture and form of social organization out of the ruins and traces of what has been lost:

Bebayedi est une g n se. Ceux qui sont ici ont des anc tres multiples, des langues diff rentes. Pourtant, ils ne font qu'un. Ils ont fui la fureur, le fracas. Ils ont jailli du chaos, refus  de se laisser entra ner dans une existence dont ils ne ma trisaient pas le sens, happer par une mort dont ils ne connaissaient ni les modalit s, ni la finalit . Ce faisant, sans en avoir pr cis ment con u le dessein, ils ont fait advenir un monde. (131)

As the *Mulongo* clan disappear from history, their culture will be integrated into this composite new tribe, and also into the world of the slaves carried across the ocean:

L  o  ils ont  t  emmen s, ils font comme nous. M me   voix basse, ils parlent notre langue. Lorsqu'ils ne peuvent pas la parler elle demeure le v hicule de leur pens e, le rythme de leurs  motions. (227)

La Saison de l'Ombre is a historical novel that is also utterly engaged in the twenty-first century. Highly “literary” in style and narrative form, its capacity to enchant the reader into an empathetic, plot-led reading was recognized and realized by the award of the Femina prize.

In conclusion, prizes are an important element of the literary market and of the vitality of reading as a cultural activity. The element of denigration in the discourse that surrounds them is part of a broader suspicion of crowd-pleasing fiction, which means broadly of narrative realism, plot-driven immersivity, and optimistic values. There has been a gendered difference in the allocation and reception of prizes from the outset, which maps neatly on to the predominantly feminine character of the middlebrow. I have argued that the “feminine” prizes are indeed the site of the (dreaded) middlebrow, but that the aesthetic that produces their popularity with readers is more interesting, more complex, and more ethically valuable than its everyday disparagement would allow.

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¹ This article emerges from a wider project on the French middlebrow from the Belle Époque to the present (Holmes, *Reclaiming*).

² As Peter Brooks observes, plot is "disdained as the element of narrative that least sets off and defines high art," being seen rather as "that which especially characterizes popular mass-consumption literature: plot is why we read Jaws, but not Henry James" (4).

³ "Bien qu'il soit gros, donc un peu encombrant, c'est le roman qu'il faut emporter en vacances." (Sauvigneau)