

BOOK REVIEWS

Middlebrow, Modernism

Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960. Edited by Erica Brown and Mary Grover. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. xii + 244 pp. \$90.00 cloth.

The profession of literary scholarship and teaching has historically depended on the adoption of a set of highbrow texts that require and reward literary study, as well as a set of middlebrow and lowbrow texts, the Others to these privileged texts. But who among us believes that any text—as if bereft of intertexts and exempt from changing constructions of cultural history—occupies a fixed position within a stable system of classification? When one considers that the vast majority of twentieth-century readers in Britain and North America read middlebrow texts, our need to defend study of the middlebrow is curious. How else can we grasp the mechanisms through which these readers' tastes were courted and cultivated? We cannot, for example, begin to understand responses to the perceived loss of a shared national literary culture in Great Britain without attention to new middlebrow media and to the authors and “taste makers” who entertained and guided new generations of twentieth-century readers. Nor can we perceive the dialectically defined positions of “highbrow,” “middlebrow,” and “lowbrow” without reference to the spacious and variegated cultural field in which middlebrow literature takes a central place.

Edited by Erica Brown and Mary Grover, the essays in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures* demonstrate that “the middlebrow matters” (1) as they carve out for detailed study several literary micro-cultural currents. Their enterprise is sociological and cultural (only a few contributors treat the literary qualities of middlebrow texts); they map the shifting, variegated geographies of literary media, publishers and publicity, critics, and readers. Collectively, the essayists make a substantial contribution to the study of twentieth-century literary culture.

A number of the essays in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures* explore outstanding figures in the field: not poets, novelists, or dramatists, but critics whose ultimate importance was their function as “taste makers.” Many had long careers in which to build up an intimate knowledge of their evolving

readership. An excellent example is “‘A Strongly Felt Need’: Wilfred Whitten/John O’London and the Rise of the New Reading Public,” by Jonathan Wild. Wilfred Whitten’s influence on readers seeking guidance included a twenty-year stint at *John O’London’s Weekly*, beginning in 1919. Modeling the pleasures of reading, for example in his “Book of the Week” column, Whitten appears to have both assumed and cultivated readers’ broad and flexible taste. For Whitten literature could serve a “normalizing” role in the lives of his postwar readers.

Although Arnold Bennett did not enjoy Whitten’s lengthy run as a cultural guide, like Whitten, his weekly column for a leading newspaper—the *Evening Standard*—positioned him to wield considerable influence, and in John Shapcott’s estimation, Bennett “both reflected and set the cultural agenda in the late 1920s” (83). And like the other taste-makers featured in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*, Bennett encouraged a broad cultural literacy, frequently devoting his column to American and continental European literature and defending censored books. One key to his success was undoubtedly his dual promotion of book-as-text and book-as-artifact.

Reading the three or four other essays devoted to such literary advisors, one comes to the conclusion that they strove less to carve out a middle ground than to advocate omnivorous reading. Caroline Pollentier and John Baxendale, both writing about J. B. Priestley’s “broadbrow,” consider the extent to which the eminently middlebrow writer and critic ought to be seen as a disrupter of hierarchies rather than as a cautious adopter of the middle way. Pollentier argues that Priestley saw his broadbrow in a somewhat utopian fashion as the sign of a superior power of discrimination leading to an eclecticism not possible for the “slaves of fashion” at the low and high ends of the spectrum of taste. And Baxendale credits Priestley with an assertive and “well-considered” solution to cultural fragmentation, urging his readers to engage with the entire cultural spectrum (78). Sharon Hamilton sees the role of H. L. Mencken and the *Smart Set* in much the same way. She posits the success of its “flexible cultural posture” (136) in this way: “The magazine intentionally assumed a particularly urbane and expansive attitude. . . . Mencken and Nathan’s refusal to make what they said or published in the *Smart Set* fit within neat boundaries implied the compliment that their readers were worldly enough to appreciate material not designed to fit into a single form” (138).

What, in the end, is the importance of this catholicity of middlebrow taste? Does it not lead perniciously to the familiar image of the middlebrow reader’s lack of discrimination? How do we keep the middlebrow from designating a catchall category? Adrian Bingham and Sharon Hamilton implicitly address this question through their focus on middlebrow readers as the most ready for transformation: newly educated and eager for cultural advancement. Among others, Bingham’s and Hamilton’s essays teach us to

see the middlebrow reader as disruptive of fixed categories of readers and texts: fluid, open-minded, adaptable, and adventuresome.

At their best, the essays delineate the dynamic complexity of cultural production. For example, in “Middlebrow Authorship, Critical Authority and Autonomous Readers in Post-war America: James Gould Cozzens, Dwight MacDonald and *By Love Possessed*,” Joan Shelley Rubin demonstrates the fundamental instability of the “middlebrow” text and author. Middlebrow status may be affixed or exchanged for the highbrow status through the navigation of mechanisms of publicity, and the designation may have little to do with literature and a great deal to do with the social tensions inflecting both the authors’ and critics’ struggle for admission to a new and unstable intellectual elite.

Middlebrow Literary Cultures tells us more about middlebrow media, critics, market forces, and editorial judgments than about readers. Where authors quote readers (as Sharon Hamilton does), they valuably connect us to the perceptions and desires of individual readers. But for the most part, the essayists are obliged to construct readers as somewhat homogenous groups. Middlebrow readers are educable, flexible in their taste, susceptible to flattery, aspirational, or actively seeking cultural guidance. Although Nick Hubble’s “Imagism, Realism, Surrealism: Middlebrow Transformations in the Mass-Observation Project” fits uneasily within the collection’s focus on literary culture—he describes a sociological enterprise which occasionally incorporated modernist aesthetics—Mass Observation documents the unmediated perceptions of thousands of ordinary people. Hubble argues compellingly that modernist techniques helped create a progressive middlebrow culture in the 1930s, enabling observers “to liberate their perceptions from externally imposed associations and so create the possibility of social change” (208). Here, the culture of the middle is constituted of readers in the broadest sense: savvy importers of the merely literary into social and political formations.

Many of the essays in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*, then, undertake the important work of challenging the denigration of the middle by showing its breadth, power, and resourcefulness. As he writes about mass-circulating newspapers in interwar Britain, for instance, Adrian Bingham acknowledges that the criterion of robust sales and circulation discouraged editors from taking risks with content. Nonetheless, he is struck by the newspapers’ “commitment to the world of books” (65). Other contributions, such as Candida Rifkind’s essay on Canadian serial fiction, examine the shortcomings of the middle, not on the grounds that it fails to meet highbrow aesthetic criteria, but to delineate the political and economic features of a micro-economy within it. For example, by studying selected American little and mainstream magazines, Victoria Kingham uncovers their cooperation in upholding a white intellectual hierarchy. Black culture was sidelined in

the name of “classical beauty” or “refined taste.” Between 1915 to 1924, little magazines vaunted their highbrow exemption from concessions to public taste, while larger circulation magazines held on to their readers by satisfying such “conventional” tastes, albeit sometimes even as they conducted a “vociferous editorial campaign against the bourgeoisie” (122).

The satisfyingly specific examinations of middlebrow literary cultures in this collection are supplemented by several essays that advance methodological approaches to the study and teaching of middlebrow literature. Kristin Bluemel’s “Illustrating *Mary Poppins*: Visual Culture and the Middlebrow” develops a paradigm for the contemporary reception of middlebrow texts, seeking to dispel the “cultural suspicion” with which the study of middlebrow texts (in which she includes illustrated children’s books) is usually met. Bluemel does so by recruiting the middlebrow for at least one of modernism’s privileges: textual complexity. Like middlebrow literature, illustrated children’s books have been disparaged, falling short of an ideal verbal purity. Yet theorists of verbal-visual relations find such verbal integrity to be mythical. As Bluemel reads across the “frontier” between P. L. Travers’s text and Mary Shepard’s frontispiece in *Mary Poppins*, she engages what W. J. T. Mitchell calls the “dialectic of discourse and vision” that reading always entails. Illustrated texts thus make apparent the nature of all texts, and, argues Bluemel, studying illustrated books should therefore be “a top priority for theorists of representation and reading” (199).

Questions of methodology lead me to ask whether middlebrow literature matters as *literature*. A few contributors affirm that it does. Without diminishing their sensitivity to complex cultural dynamics, Bluemel and Humble skillfully attend to the tones and textures of the text itself. And Janet Casey considers how the middlebrow matters in the undergraduate literature classroom. In “Middlebrow Reading and Undergraduate Teaching: The Place of the Middlebrow in the Academy,” Casey locates middlebrow literature at the center of the social, economic, and cultural currents that comprise literary study, and offers practical suggestions for teaching it. In one of the most stimulating and compelling cases for the importance of the middlebrow, Casey points out that “Collectively, all literary works define and refine the meanings and positionings of all other works in the field” (26). Moreover, argues Casey, we should foreground for our students the contingency of literary status, exposing the affiliations, institutions, and influences that lead to assessment of any work of literature.

By now, scholars of middlebrow culture hardly need to make the case that the middlebrow matters: “it is the middlebrow’s centrality to the entire enterprise of literary studies that demands our attention,” Casey emphasizes (27). In the richly detailed cultural fields that their research unearths, the essayists of *Middlebrow Literary Cultures* certainly establish lines of inquiry for future research. Moreover, in their appreciation for the

“exciting dynamism” (27) that characterizes the making of middlebrow culture, they model the rewards and pleasures of its study.

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