Playing Smart: New York Women Writers and Modern Magazine Culture. By Catherine Keyser. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. 2010. 240 pp. $39.95 cloth.

"I don't think that any word in the English language has a horrider connotation than sophisticate," said Dorothy Parker in 1939. This line, which Catherine Keyser quotes in her chapter on Parker, perfectly encapsulates the doubled, ironic, and self-mocking rhetorical practices of the authors she studies. As Keyser notes, Parker's persona as "urban sophisticate" (76) was crucial to her literary success, yet her uneasiness with that identity is often legible in her writing. Similar anxieties about the potential triviality or inauthenticity of the public roles available to women are shared by the other writers included in *Playing Smart*: Edna St Vincent Millay, Jessie Fauset, Dawn Powell, and Mary McCarthy. "These witty writers," Keyser writes in her introduction, "participated in a culture of publicity and a marketplace of class and gender ideals; they drew upon periodical conventions and familiar genres, *and* they adopted literary strategies of irony and persona to address the themes of alienation and masquerade" (10). This statement is an apt summary of this excellent book, which argues that the smart writers of interwar New York used middlebrow ambivalence to undercut the naturalness of identities sold to women by the mass media.

The titles of Keyser's five chapters each focus on a single author, but the chapters themselves range more widely, contextualising the chosen author in relation to her peers. The chapter on Parker, for instance, also contains excellent material on Anita Loos and on the *New Yorker* columnist Lois Long, while the chapter on Jessie Fauset examines Nella Larsen in almost as much detail as Fauset herself. (The choice to include Harlem Renaissance authors is particularly welcome: they are often omitted from research on metropolitan literary cultures, yet Keyser's discussion of Fauset's *Plum Bun* is one of the most compelling parts of the book.) Each chapter traces numerous professional networks, personal relationships, and intertextual echoes connecting overlapping groups of American authors. *Playing Smart*, then, is not a study of five individuals but an analysis of a whole culture,

with its headquarters in interwar New York and its audiences extending as far in space and time as fantasies of smartness can travel.

The exploration of the idea of "smartness" is perhaps the most fascinating theme of the book. Keyser pays close attention to uses of the word itself in texts from the twenties and thirties, arguing that it "plays a double role; first, as a prized value in middlebrow magazine culture and, second, as a facilitating tactic for these writers." She explains that: "The ideal of smartness connoted a number of individual and coordinating qualities: wealth and elite social status, conversance with the latest trends, practical intelligence, a sense of humor, fashion sense, and sex appeal" (6).

The other key term in the book's title, "playing," is more perplexing. Keyser quotes David Savran's argument concerning middlebrow writers' anxieties about their own tastes and uneasiness over the divide between art and commerce. Immediately afterwards, she suggests that the writers she studies, "perhaps because of the liminality of their professional and literary status, felt comfortable playing with and across this divide" (10). There is a contradiction here (unease versus comfort), which perhaps needs to be addressed a little more directly. Nevertheless, the notion of playfulness is deployed to great effect at many points in the book, and Keyser's celebration of the irreverence, wit, and inventiveness of New York women writers is one of the most appealing aspects of her project.

The authors considered in *Playing Smart* all contributed to, and in some cases edited, important periodicals in the 1920s and 1930s. The smart magazines--*Vanity Fair, The New Yorker, Harper's Bazaar*--are at the centre of this study, but they are compared with black press titles including *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, and with women's fashion magazines, daily newspapers, and little magazines. Keyser's account reveals many shared preoccupations connecting these different types of periodicals, and so challenges conventional methods of categorisation. Keyser explores the middlebrow area in between "little" and mass-market periodicals, emphasising the exchange across cultural boundaries which was facilitated by writers and editors who worked for both elite and popular titles. In this way, her book makes a very important contribution to the ongoing critical project of producing a more nuanced account of the early twentieth-century literary marketplace.

In addition to analysis of periodicals, Keyser offers detailed close readings of novels and stories which thematise magazine culture. These readings are accomplished and intriguing, and are informed by theories of celebrity, originality, and authenticity (Walter Benjamin is given particular prominence). Most of the readings focus on fictional characters who negotiate the New York magazine world, either as journalists or as avid readers. This method is effective in building the larger arguments of *Playing Smart*, though the concentration on character means that we get little sense of the

verbal texture of the . ction: quotations tend to be brief and illustrative. Keyser takes a rather different approach in the chapter on Millay, which includes longer extracts from her poetry and explores the author's "instrumental use of feminine fashions" (25). We should not, perhaps, be surprised to find that the effect of the quotations is to reveal the *un*fashionableness of Millay's writing in a twenty-first century context. As Keyser remarks, "Millay's various postures of detachment, seductiveness, playfulness, and glee fit within this world of swank and desirable femininity, but they also open up strategies for its undoing" (27). Ultimately, Millay's fashionableness, like that of the other "smart" authors of the twenties, *was* her undoing, and kept her out of the canon of modern American writing from the late 1930s until the 1990s. It is true that once-fashionable authors like Parker, Millay, Powell, and McCarthy are often difficult to appreciate now, yet at their best they are marvellously amusing, sharp, and insightful. Keyser considers both their memorable and their forgettable texts, and this in itself is a smart choice. Instead of filleting interwar magazines for choice items, as so many critics and anthologists have done in the intervening decades, she offers a more comprehensive, rounded view of the careers of her chosen authors and their relationship with the magazines they wrote for. The middlebrow periodical marketplace is an aspect of early twentieth-century cultural history that is highly deserving of further critical attention, and Keyser has advanced our understanding of it significantly.

—Faye Hammill, University of Strathclyde