

Book Reviews

Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Twentieth-Century British Fiction.
By Judy Suh. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 311 pp. \$47.50 cloth.
The Ordeal of Warwick Deeping: Middlebrow Authorship and Cultural Embarrassment. By Mary Grover. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2009. 232 pp. \$53.50 cloth.

Recent scholarship on fiction that has been labeled with the derogatory term “middlebrow” takes on the challenge of scrutinizing the grounds upon which judgments of these texts have been made, questioning the strategies of earlier literary critics and many of the assumptions that we have inherited from them. Each of these two critical studies continues to unravel critical distinctions between high- and middlebrow culture, showing that many hitherto accepted critical constructions of the term “middlebrow” no longer can apply. Mary Grover’s bold study of Warwick Deeping reveals the means by which his contemporaries used this prolific and hugely popular writer as a straw man against whom to define literary taste, denigrating middlebrow culture in asserting their own elite credentials. Judy Suh debunks the commonplace that middlebrow writers were either conservative, politically disengaged, or quietist, instead showing that middlebrow fiction in the 1930s was deeply engaged in the debate about fascism. Each volume thus asserts the value of middlebrow texts that would otherwise be dismissed on various grounds, not the least of which was that middlebrow novelists were unaware of the literary strategies they used.

Mary Grover shows Warwick Deeping to be highly engaged with challenging the critics who sought to denigrate him. Deeping’s productivity (63 novels in 54 years) and vast appeal resulted in his dismissal as feminine, sentimental, and disconnected from the social realities of 1930s Britain, even though he directly depicted many of the economic hardships of the time. Interestingly, and importantly, Grover resists making judgments about the quality of Deeping’s work, and so provokes reflection on an often unexamined conviction: that literary criticism is about “great books.” The choice of Deeping allows Grover to engage in subtle analysis of the post-First World War “distinctions” (Pierre Bourdieu’s term) between the lower middle class and those who were anxious to distinguish themselves from it. This focus reveals that, as Grover claims, “From its apparent inception the term ‘middlebrow’ is being used to heighten the cultural distinction of the users of such a term” (36). This important insight turns the scrutinizing lens on the work of literary critics within cultural production.

Grover urges, furthermore, that Deeping “was shaping or championing the values of those readers” in “a certain fraction of the lower middle class” and “challenging the forces of legitimate culture, contributing to changing patterns of taste” (34). While Grover concurs with Bourdieu that “the expression of taste is inevitably a class strategy and a reflection of class position and trajectory,” she rejects both Bourdieu’s and Q. D. Leavis’s assertions that middlebrow culture “designates the field of potential action which producers of this type of art and culture explicitly assign themselves” (16, 17). Instead Grover distinguishes Deeping from “his . . . public in background of taste and intellectual environment,” noting the very plurality of the classes of people who bought his books that was itself the source of Q.

D.'s unease: Deeping was read both by shop-girls and by those who governed Britain (17). Grover asserts that by homogenizing middlebrow readership and writers, critics have elevated themselves.

Grover argues that Bourdieu's analysis of cultural capital posits that "dominant social classes subordinate less powerful social groups by making it impossible for members of dominated social groups to fully assimilate and acquire the tastes of the socially dominant" (qtd in Grover 20). She goes on to show, however, that Bourdieu's analysis perpetuates this social authority of the critic, since "he does not communicate a value for working class, let alone *petit bourgeois* culture. Instead he asserts the value of his own professional group or class, the academic" (21).

Having alerted us to this danger that the work of criticism might merely reinforce the social distinction or taste of the critic, Grover then shows the value of Deeping strenuously defending his cultural agency against criticism from members of the upper middle class such as the Leavises, whose "cultural capital [was] of new coinage" (17). The Leavises' vehemence, Grover boldly and convincingly argues, was rooted in their own social anxiety. Grover goes on to argue that Deeping's resistance to this criticism depends, ironically, on the same cultural and literary critical justifications as those that Q. D. Leavis used in her iconic *Fiction and the Reading Public*. Grover's volume thought-provokingly alerts us to the role of literary critics in the construction of critical authority, while at the same time providing in her own writing an example of judicious use of academic power.

Judy Suh's book contributes another important examination of commonplaces surrounding middlebrow fiction. Debunking the myth that it was either disengaged from its political milieu, conservative, or quietist, an issue particularly pertinent to the political context of the 1930s, Suh importantly characterizes the middlebrow novel as an significant site of resistance to a fascism that had made inroads into mainstream British culture. While domestic fiction is often perceived to be isolated from public, political discourse, Suh shows that in fact the discourse about women's sexuality and role in the family—what she terms "biopolitics"—was central to debates surrounding fascism and anti-fascism. In discussing six women novelists and one man, two of whom had fascist sympathies, Suh points out that "the 1930s . . . radically reconceptualized middle-class womanhood in Britain, and was in many ways more liberatory" than the decades before and after it (177). The anti-fascist novels under discussion expose fascism's co-optation of gender politics, while Wyndham Lewis's *The Revenge for Love* and Olive Hawks's *What Hope for Green Street* vilify feminism and Bloomsbury as responsible for Britain's demise, using domestic fiction as a form in which to oppose the attitudes held in Bloomsbury. Satirical depictions of Bloomsbury are common in middlebrow fiction, but Suh demonstrates that Lewis adopted the middlebrow as an alternative to the

highbrow for political ends.

In particular, what Suh sees as fascism's "collusion with fantasy," which "creat[ed] new modes of autonomy for women," becomes the focus for the writers who she examines (179). Suh's book shows how the variety of anti-fascist articulations used by Nancy Mitford, Virginia Woolf, Phyllis Bottome, Elizabeth Bowen, and Muriel Spark all treat "biopolitics" as central to debates about fascism and anti-fascism. For example, Suh shows that Phyllis Bottome's "oeuvre demonstrates the capacity of middlebrow culture, which is often regrettably dismissed as provincial or regional, for a cosmopolitan political perception and class mobility important for twentieth-century feminists" (70). Bottome's work, Suh says, stages the embattled ground of European politics of the 1930s and 1940s by uncovering systematic violence as well as democratic possibilities inherent to generic settings of women's fiction (71). Suh's demonstration of the domestic space as a site for anti-fascist debate might make us wonder why anyone ever imagined the domestic space to be apolitical.

In placing Virginia Woolf's *The Years* alongside texts otherwise thought of as middlebrow, Suh both alerts us to the domestic character of much high modernist culture and deftly suggests the arbitrary nature of the distinction between high and middlebrow. This juxtaposition, albeit in the book's most tentative chapter, marks a daring and long overdue dismantling of the boundary between highbrow and middlebrow cultural production. Woolf's most realist novel since *The Voyage Out*, *The Years* nevertheless uses modernist techniques, for example in its use of characters' memories, to shape the narrative in a way that would be uncharacteristic of the more realist approaches of much middlebrow fiction. But Suh invokes Nicola Humble's characterization of the middlebrow as having an "overriding concern with the home," and couples this with an Woolf's use of "anti-heroic deflation similar to Bottome's"; together these stances, she argues, allowed the rejection of both neo-classical modernism and patriarchal politics (103). Similarly, the discussion of Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* allows Suh to reveal the permeability of the boundaries between fascism and mainstream politics as they appear in the novel, which self-reflexively enacts Spark's "ethical concern with a fascist appropriation of omniscient narrative" (165). Like the other texts under consideration in *Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Twentieth-Century British Fiction*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* illustrates the temptation that fascism's apparent emancipatory potential offered to certain kinds of women (167). Jean Brodie, similarly, "provides an alternative model of middle-class femininity that diverges from the prevalent route of marriage" (168).

Suh's chapter on Mitford and Bowen focuses on their "reinvigoration of the country house ethos" to examine upper-class fascist tendencies: she finds Bowen's "reinvigoration" to be more effective since it is not nostalgic

about the decline of the aristocracy (129). Suh challenges Raymond Williams's assertion that the country house novel "had lost the capacity to criticize the 'sources of success, power and money' that underpinned the upper class" (Suh 131). As a middlebrow form generally dismissed as conservative, country house fiction could instead, Suh claims, allow examination of the "national ethos" and an indictment of the aristocracy for leaving a space, by its very moribundity, for fascism to step in and "define alternatives to bourgeois hegemony" (134, 139).

Suh's book closes with the statement that,

In demanding our attention to the subtle but key differences that constitute acts of narrative control, the narrator obliterates the reader's will to be led. In these ways, the novel continues the complex and long-standing critique in twentieth-century women's fiction of fascist desires that subvert some of the twentieth century's most familiar environments. (181)

Suh's book would have benefited from a more ambitious conclusion, perhaps one that engaged with the appearance of cosmopolitanism (often as a code-word for Jewishness) in the discourse of fascism and anti-fascism, and how it functions as well in definitions of the middlebrow novel. But her study contributes in important and valuable ways to the critical project of examining middlebrow culture.

While we can perhaps understand, if not applaud, the motives of critics who assert academic superiority over lower-middle-class writers, and can learn from their negative example, it remains puzzling why critical studies of middlebrow fiction have so consistently ignored the political message of fiction that sought to create an anti-fascist imperative and to arouse concern about international politics. Suh and Grover together alert us to the social power and responsibilities of criticism as a political tool. Grover shows that the critic's self-constructed authority, if used unreflectively, can reinscribe the power of the upper-middle class while defensively denigrating culture that is perceived as lower on the social scale. *Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Twentieth-Century British Fiction* shows that domestic fiction disregarded because of its middlebrow taint might exert considerable social power if allowed its cultural authority. These books assert the value of middlebrow works, and alert us to the need for more examination of their complexities.

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