

Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars. By Faye Hammill. Austin: University of Texas, 2007. 261pp. \$45.00 cloth.

In *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars*, Faye Hammill turns a critical spotlight on that much-talked-about figure, the female celebrity, and situates her within modern literary culture and the growing mass media. Hammill highlights interwar women writers' meditations on their cultural status as celebrities and their manipulations of their public personae. In tackling celebrity, Hammill takes on a topic of great moment in literary and cultural studies. As of this writing, *PMLA* is coordinating a special topics issue on "Celebrity, Fame, and Notoriety." David Marshall, Joe Moran, and Aaron Jaffe are among the recent critics—all cited by Hammill—who theorize celebrity in its literary and extra-literary dimensions. Hammill works skillfully with the insights offered by such critics, and she self-consciously places herself within a growing group of feminist

critics (including Jaime Harker, Nicola Humble, Alison Light, Nina Miller, and Kristin Bluemel) whose work focuses on and indeed champions middle-brow writers.

Hammill's study addresses seven popular women writers from America, Canada, and England: Dorothy Parker, Anita Loos, Mae West, L. M. Montgomery, Margaret Kennedy, Stella Gibbons, and E. M. Delafield. Hammill argues that their writing, "which cannot be easily accommodated to the paradigms of either high modernism or popular culture," must be understood and can only be justly evaluated as stylistic and thematic engagement with the conditions of modernity (7). Hammill observes that middlebrow literary works "are often overlooked because they do not correspond to the experimental strategies of high modernism. In sum, a new critical approach to such material is needed" (6). Hammill demonstrates such an approach by marrying close readings of the works of her central writers with the troublesome bedfellows of their press clippings, celebrity roles, and critical reception.

Hammill moves geographically in this study from the more overtly celebrity-seeking approaches of American writers Parker, Loos, and West to the more ambivalent attitudes about popularity and fame evinced by Canadian writer Montgomery and English writers Kennedy, Gibbons, and Delafield. (In an amusing sidelight, Hammill documents Montgomery's frustrations about the Americanization of *Anne of Green Gables* by Hollywood studios.) Without reducing cultural differences, Hammill's transatlantic approach charts the importance for modern literary culture of this widespread reflexivity about celebrity and gender.

In each chapter, Hammill establishes how entrenched her writers were in mass media culture and stresses their self-conscious negotiation of cultural tiers and value judgments. Hammill's close readings substantiate the premise that these texts reflect on those contexts. Hammill also explains that the fame and gender of these authors were simultaneously fetishized and dismissed by the press and other members of the literary establishment. For example, she memorably quotes William Faulkner praising Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* by suggesting that that book's satirical success was accidental: "you have builded better than you knew" (quoted in Hammill 63). Such backhanded compliments abound in this story of female celebrity; they were used to promote the sale of women writers' books and then to denigrate their literary legacy.

Hammill considers women writers with an impressive variety of personae: the urbane humor of Dorothy Parker, the feigned infantilism of Anita Loos, the wise-cracking seductions of Mae West, the pastoral primness of L. M. Montgomery, the highbrow remoteness of Margaret Kennedy, the practical wit of Stella Gibbons, and the provincial fluster of E. M. Delafield. Hammill treats each persona as a fiction, and yet she also demonstrates

the potency of that fiction. For example, having delineated the domestic routines of her narrator the “provincial lady,” a character whose fictional diary her author traced through several volumes, E. M. Delafield adopted this cozy feminine role for herself in the public eye to render palatable the ambitious professionalism of her journalism and novel-writing.

One of the highlights of the book is Hammill’s contextualization of Dorothy Parker’s prose within the magazine culture of her period. Hammill argues that Parker “reaffirm[s] herself as a recognizable and famous ‘character’ . . . whilst also reflecting critically on her celebrity image and on the culture which circulates it” (48). Because a fantasy about Parker’s bitter and even tragic celebrity has endured in our present moment, even contemporary critics sometimes lapse into belief in the legend. Hammill’s attention to Parker’s manipulation of persona is but one example of the way in which her close readings, which explore voice, style, and parody, restore to middlebrow works their merited complexity. As Hammill observes, “Much middlebrow writing has been ignored by the academy because of a misperception that it is so straightforward as to require no analysis, while in fact, its witty, polished surfaces frequently conceal unexpected depths and subtleties” (6). Her close readings plumb these depths and do justice to these subtleties, resisting the fetishization of stylistic experimentation and *avant-gardism*.

Mae West proves the most problematic figure in this study, as her novels do not stand up to the rigorous close reading that Hammill accomplishes elsewhere. Hammill admits that much of the writing in West’s novels was carried out by “assistants,” so it seems perhaps awkward to favor her literary work with such excessively respectful close readings as: “This impressionistic, fragmented style shows a trace of modernist influence and represents a new direction for West” (81). West as performer, icon, and celebrity is much more compelling (and compellingly glossed by Hammill) than West as author. The one surprising oversight of this study is its failure to significantly tackle questions of race and ethnicity. Hammill briefly addresses ethnicity and dialect in her chapter on West, and she mentions Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston in her introduction. Hammill’s focus on celebrity and gender begs the question of celebrity, gender, and race in the era of Josephine Baker and Harlem Renaissance literary luminaries, but it does not speculate on these topics.

With her impressive range of examples and types—from the racism of Mae West to the pluck of Anne Shirley—and her canny attention to the critical condescension these writers faced, Hammill advocates for the importance of middlebrow fiction by women writers and sharpens our critical vision of modern fiction. Hammill ends with a rousing call to grant these writers their due in modernist studies: “if their work is measured against dominant literary models, it will always appear to fall short . . . it

is . . . essential to read them on their own terms, and in the context of the particular conditions under which they wrote” (206). Hammill begins and ends her book with this simple yet essential premise: that the middlebrow perspective was neither monolithic nor invariably myopic and that middlebrow literature merits sophisticated and varied critical approaches. As Hammill aptly notes: “the middlebrow was a capacious formation” (196). Hammill draws critical attention to some of the unduly overlooked women of modern literary culture and to the unfairly slighted category of the middlebrow. She thus opens the way for further consideration of such crucial figures hidden in plain view.

—Catherine Keyser, University of South Carolina