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Evelyne Bloch-Dano, *Madame Proust: A Biography*, trans., Alice Kaplan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 272 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$27.50. ISBN 0226056422.

Review by André Benhaïm, Princeton University.

*Madame Proust: A Biography* is a rather odd book that will leave some readers raving and others frustrated. To the multitude of biographies already devoted to French novelist Marcel Proust, widely seen as the most influential author of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Evelyne Bloch-Dano proposes to add her own account not of the author, but of his mother. To be sure, Proust's work is largely inspired by autobiography, and in that context it gives the narrator's mother a fundamental role. Bloch-Dano thus proposes a biography of Jeanne Proust, née Jeanne Weil, not only because she may be "the most influential mother figure in modern literary history," as states the translator in her opening note (p. xi), but also (and seemingly most importantly) because, as a Jew born and raised in France's Third Republic, Jeanne Proust seemed to embody French Jewry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, incarnating the challenges and opportunities available to Jews in the first nation to have given them citizenship in Europe.

However, it is important to be aware that this book is not a traditional biography. Indeed, as the talented translator, Alice Kaplan, eminent historian of World War II France and the Occupation, states in her foreword, "Bloch-Dano writes much of her book in the style of fiction [...]. But *Madame Proust* is anything but fiction: Almost every detail, almost every quoted word or phrase is taken directly from the writings of Jeanne Weil and Marcel Proust" (p. xi). The key word here, of course, is *almost*. Despite this warning, which immediately raises suspicion, many readers may still be put off by Bloch-Dano's precious, flowery style which at times takes bold liberties with conversations and descriptions. For example, in the opening "scene," Jeanne Proust is described as waiting anxiously before dinner time with the rest of the family for her brother to return: "All you could see of her was a mass of brown hair gathered into a chignon and a few strands of loose hair on the nape of her neck. Her white summer dress showed off her ivory profile" (p. 4). Bloch-Dano goes on to compare Jeanne Proust to Jane Austen's characters (p. 7). Given some of the invented dialogues, more straitlaced historians would likely prefer that the book be titled "Madame Proust: A Semibiographical Novel."

Strangely, the book alternates between these pseudo-romantic descriptions, worthy of what delighted Emma Bovary, and painstaking details of Jeanne Proust's Jewish ancestry (p. 16, p. 26) that may prove tiresome for those readers enjoying the literary style interrupted by these lists. Those interested in genealogy and history will appreciate learning about the destiny of these men and women (often reduced to caricatures of stern, authoritative, and ambitious men on the one hand, and submissive yet just as determined and much more subtle and cultivated women on the other). However, many readers will feel short-changed on what could have proven the most stimulating elements. For instance, the author is surprisingly brief on the context and conditions of the emancipation of Jews in the wake of the French Revolution (a short paragraph on p. 18). And after learning that Baruch Weil, Jeanne's grandfather, and therefore Marcel's great-grandfather, was the first Jew to become a French citizen under Napoleon Bonaparte (p. 19), readers certainly would have appreciated it if Bloch-Dano had elaborated a little on the very ambiguous (to say the least) policies the Emperor had set in place for Jews. But for that, one may prefer to read actual historical essays, such as those by Pierre Birnbaum.

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On another critical event in French Jewish history, the Dreyfus Affair, the book does not yield much new information. Again, other reading provides the context: Birnbaum's *The Anti-Semitic Moment: A Tour of France in 1898*, or, through a more biographical lens, Michael Burns's outstanding *Dreyfus: A Family Affair, 1789-1945*. [1]

To be sure, the primary originality of the book lies in the fact that it studies a female Jewish experience in French history. But this interesting aspect of the work is somewhat undermined by the author's overly romanticized style and a fictionalized perspective which tend to defeat the purpose of her approach, especially if that purpose was to convey a feminist account of literary and cultural history. That said, readers who enjoy getting their history through novelistic accounts will appreciate Bloch-Dano's extensive research and fanciful writing.

[1] Pierre Birnbaum, *The Anti-Semitic Moment: A Tour of France in 1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002) and Michael Burns, *Dreyfus: A Family Affair, 1789-1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

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