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Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Would-Be Commoner: A Tale of Deception, Murder, and Justice in Seventeenth-Century France*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008. xxv + 288 pp. Illustrations, maps, and index. \$25.00 U.S. (hb.) ISBN 978-0-618-19731-6.

Review by Carolyn Lougee Chappell, Stanford University.

Historians have long been admonished to write for “that elusive critter called the general reader,” to break out of their grad-school-induced practice of writing for each other in tiny editions on topics of interest only to themselves.[1] United States historians seem to have come closest to meeting this goal of capturing a broad audience, perhaps because many in their field are independent scholars rather than academics. There have of course been some notable successes from academic pens in the French field—Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou* and Simon Schama’s *Citizens* spring to mind.[2] But addressing the general public is not easily accomplished. Unless they are willing to take the advice I once received from a colleague in French literature—“Why don’t you just write a novel?”—historians face serious challenges in making good history connect with readers who have shown themselves ready to be intrigued by *The Da Vinci Code* or *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*. [3]

Jeffrey Ravel’s *The Would-Be Commoner* illustrates the complexity of this aspiration. Ravel does not specify that he targets a general audience, but his choice of a trade publisher as well as inclusion in the text of frequent explanations and definitions that no specialist requires suggest that he did envision a broad readership for his exposition of an odd and mystifying criminal case from the last decade of the seventeenth century.

The book will be admired on numerous grounds. Ravel displays a remarkable depth of understanding on a broad spectrum of subjects: legal briefs and summations, live theater, intricacies of law and court procedures, local history, the swirl of simultaneous happenings in Paris at the moment of the trial. His distinctive contribution to a case that has been revisited many times over the years is the archival research he undertakes in order to purify the case of accreted legend and identify the principal source of its falsification. The presentation is well-constructed and nicely illustrated with contemporary engravings and documents. It would be hard to imagine more impressive, exhaustive archival research or more beautiful writing. Ravel slows the narrative and decompresses the academic’s usual dense prose to provide what the general reader needs to know. Can the book, then, serve as a model for historians who aspire to write for the general reader?

The “would-be commoner” of the book’s title was Louis de la Pivardière, seigneur de Narbonne, who quitted his still-living-wife’s Berrichon estate around 1690, ostensibly to fight in the War of the League of Augsburg, and resettled in Auxerre as the *roturier* “Louis Dubouchet,” husband of a *huissier*’s daughter. Back in Berry it was rumored after his disappearance that he had been murdered by his wife and her priest-lover, and an investigation initiated by the local *présidial* began to wend its way up to the highest and most highly publicized court in the land, the Parlement of Paris. As Ravel shows, the authorities were puzzled (the *avocat général* Henri-François d’Aguesseau delivered one of his philosophically deep and oratorically moving summations in the case), the public feasted upon the case’s ambiguities (an F.C. Dancourt play about the case ran at the Comédie-Française simultaneously with

the Parliamentary appeal), and even the international press reported the irregular progress towards solving the mystery. Ravel connects the major difficulties in the case to skepticism and Cartesian epistemology, uncertainties about identity, shifting definitions of social status, and (less convincingly) to questioning of Louis XIV's authority in his failure-riddled later years. These connections are presumably what in Ravel's mind raise the case from a mere curiosity to a microhistorical incident with historical significance.

While the book is superbly researched, beautifully written, and effectively contextualized, certain aspects of Ravel's approach probably will work against his aim of capturing and holding a non-academic reader. Its best use may well be precisely within an academic setting, as a textbook students are required to read in Old Regime undergraduate courses. There, it could serve well as a single unified focal point for pursuing a variety of themes: the political character of Louis XIV's reign, the everyday lives of the poor nobility, the workings of French law courts, the province of Berry, the unsettling effects of pre-Enlightenment philosophy, and the interactive theatre of Paris. For other readers, it may both retain too much of the academic and yield too little of significance. The issues chosen for highlighting and explanation tend to be those that tie into recent lines of inquiry among specialists but may strike the uninitiated as esoteric. The intricacy and extent of explanation and analysis that the case requires—or at least that Ravel gives it—sometimes get overly detailed and blunt the impact of the story itself. For all the case's sensational ingredients—deception, murder, and justice—the book may not engross the general reader. So little can be known of the characters and their personalities—they enjoy none of the color, for example, that Le Roy Ladurie is able to lend the Clergues—that they do not quite come to life. Ravel is forced to resort to lifting their basic biographical facts from the claims in their pleadings, thus muddying himself the border between fact and fiction he is attempting to clarify. For all the rich contextualization Ravel provides, it remains unclear that the case satisfies the requirement that microhistory yield insights into significant dimensions of the past that are to be gained in no other way, rather than merely illustrating what is known through other methods.

A book of many merits, then, Ravel's *Would-Be Commoner* leaves the question of how an academic historian can interest a general reader about where he found it. The question remains: What must the academic historian do who aspires to reach a broad readership, beyond wrapping the methods and interests of scholars in accessible, non-technical prose?

NOTES

[1] Forrest McDonald, *Recovering the Past: a Historian's Memoir* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 2004.

[2] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989).

[3] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003); Tracy Chevalier, *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* (New York: Dutton, 2000).

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