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Carolyn Burke, *No Regrets: The Life of Edith Piaf*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011. xvii + 282 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$27.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-307-26801-3.

Review by Joelle Neulander, The Citadel.

Carolyn Burke, in her biography *No Regrets: The Life of Edith Piaf*, sets herself a lofty goal. She wants to rewrite the story of one of the most storied celebrities of the twentieth century. She chooses to do this in order to destroy the standard biography that has built up around the star, the “myth” of Piaf, or “the cliché of Piaf as self-destructive waif” (p. xiv). This biography looks to make the Piaf story more “complex” by focusing on Piaf’s milieu—her artist-friends and the society she kept as a performer, and more importantly, as a songwriter and lyricist. For, as Burke reminds us, Piaf did not simply interpret others’ work, she wrote over one hundred songs for herself and her friends. This life story would serve as a counter-narrative to her celebrity profile as a fragile, drug-addicted genius, an image more commonly known to audiences both past and present, and seen as recently as 2007 in Marion Cotillard’s Oscar-winning performance as Piaf in *La môme*.<sup>[1]</sup> This is a difficult, yet important task, to shift our view of Piaf from victim into feminist icon. To do this Burke promises two things: first, that she will leave much of the salacious rumor out of her story; and second, that she will rely on Piaf’s performance and poetry as guides to the real story of the star’s life.

Edith Piaf was born Edith Giovanna Gassion in Belleville in 1915, to parents who left her to her grandmother’s care and a childhood living in a brothel. She spent some of her childhood singing in movie theaters and travelling with her father, who showed up sporadically in her early life. Discovered at eighteen singing as a street performer in Ménilmontant, she became a performer of *chansons réalistes*, in the style of the singing star, Marie Dubas. Adopting the moniker of “Môme Piaf,” or little sparrow, Edith quickly became a sensation, and the protégé of Raymond Asso, the premiere writer of realist songs. He would shape her into a stage performer acceptable to theater audiences.

It is at this point in her story that Carolyn Burke shines as a biographer, illuminating Piaf’s path from ingénue and diligent student of others in her late teens and early twenties, to the woman in total control of her performances and her career. She has an excellent chapter on Asso’s domination of Piaf’s personality and stage presence, and we, as readers, are relieved as Piaf is released from his control when he is called up for service in 1939. Burke goes on to show Piaf in her role as producer, describing in detail the rehearsals for “L’Accordéoniste,” parsing out her gestures and performance. Here we see Piaf in command, “With the first refrain...she ran her hands up and down her slender form. Until then, Piaf had held her hands at her sides. Now they enacted her possession by the music, her abandonment to it. With a minimum of gestures, she sketched the *fille de joie’s* bliss, then her unbearable sorrow” (p. 72). Here, Burke shows us how Piaf became the beloved, iconic performer, shaping her own career and stage show without interference from 1939 on.

Burke continues on with Piaf’s story, amply telling the tale of a performer at the height of her creativity, who entertained audiences across France, who brought joy to millions, and who launched the careers of young stars like Yves Montand, Charles Aznavour, and Eddie Constantine. She travelled constantly and worked herself to exhaustion. After years of touring, and several affairs with her collaborators, Piaf’s life

ended abruptly in 1963, while she was still attached to a young man, Théophanis Lamboukas, who she hoped would be a new singing star. After her death, Burke shows, Piaf's fans continued to adore her and her memory.

In *No Regrets*, Burke gives us a tidy (if unsalacious) chronological look at Piaf's tumultuous life. But throughout, something of heart is missing. If Piaf, in her own words, "regretted nothing," then why leave out the sex and drugs? The seediness of Piaf's life was a part of her appeal and a part of what engendered her artistic passion. To remove her from it is to remove her from the very milieu that Burke wants to describe. Burke is desperate to save Piaf from her own sins, downplaying her ferocious character for the image she created in her songs as the positive woman who overcame all adversity. Yes, Piaf certainly had fame, but her life was far from the beatific vision she set down in her lyrics. Her past haunted her every step and she took out her pain in drug addiction and serial love affairs. But in Burke's work, we see only the positive—Piaf the mentor, Piaf the survivor, Piaf the resistance hero. Burke even places Piaf into the heavens at her death, informing her readers that a planet was named after her. She tells us, "Since then, the diminutive star has been part of the solar system (*sic*), her incandescence illuminating our lives below" (p. 234). Biography should not be hagiography, and seldom is hagiography so literal. It needs to look at the dark side as well as the light. Piaf was no saint, and she certainly did not believe herself to be one.

What we are left with is something that might please Piaf fans, but not historians and anyone who wishes to understand Piaf as a symbol of the important moments of the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the post-war boom. While Piaf surrounded herself with artists and intellectuals, the world beyond her stage and her apartments remains as hazy as it was before beginning the book. We are still left wondering how a woman with so much to live for died so young. How a woman who was a paragon of stagecraft and song could have led such a mess of a life. And we wonder about the real struggles the feminist song-writer and producer of the post-war period faced in the male-dominated world of show business and theater. But the larger world of performance and recording in the twentieth-century is left out of the pages of this book. My suggestion, if one wants to celebrate Piaf as the singer-songwriter she was, would be to find and play a compilation of her music and let Piaf herself convince you of her genius. She can do it well enough all on her own.

#### NOTE

[1] Marion Cotillard, *La môme*, directed by Olivier Dahan (Paris: Légende Film, 2007).

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