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Brian Nelson, *The Cambridge Introduction to French Literature*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 318 pp. Historical timeline, notes, bibliography, and index. \$32.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780521715096.

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Having undertaken the unenviable task of introducing students and the general public to the broad subject of French literature in fewer than 250 pages, Brian Nelson has produced an engaging and vibrant survey of Great Men from Villon to Beckett, plus Madame de Lafayette, and a closing chapter on literature after 1950. This latest attempt to seduce a new generation of readers to the pleasures and possibilities of French letters—both literature and its scholarship—is sure to both delight and enrage, as its charming economy of content and language frequently render its subject fascinating and digestible, albeit at the expense of some important omissions.

Nelson acknowledges at the outset that, *qua* introduction, “the present volume [...] stands condemned in advance” (p. ix), and thus dedicates his preface to explaining the goals, methods, and parameters of his inevitably disappointing project. The author renounces immediately (and quite reasonably) any claim toward “comprehensive coverage,” and underscores the fact that he “focuse[s] on a relatively limited number of writers” (p. ix). No doubt anticipating the criticism of his peers for failing to include any given author, Nelson insists that his primary aim—“to provide a critical introduction to French literature that is scholarly yet highly accessible” (p. ix)—has guided him to privilege “readability,” which he understands as designating a critical approach and method as much as a lucid and concise writing style. This review will begin with an appreciation of the book’s considerable strengths and successes within its author’s stated framework, before considering the shortcomings that fall—perhaps too conveniently—outside of that framework.

To say that this book is readable would be a serious understatement; from its opening paragraph to its final pages, *The Cambridge Introduction to French Literature* is a pleasant tour through many of the most salient figures, movements, and episodes of the past 600 years, accompanied by an affable, knowledgeable, and enthusiastic guide with a laudable talent for selecting and packing relevant and interesting information into concise but compelling prose. The volume is organized into thirty chapters of five to eight pages each, nearly all focusing on a single author, and explicitly designed to be read as a series of individual essays. Most of the chapters conform to a similar approach: a brief discussion of the author’s (or authors’) socio-historical context, often couched within a schematic outline of the larger historical backdrop, an interesting biographical sketch (Nelson excels at painting compelling portraits of the people behind the works), and a hint of close reading of one or two excerpts from an exemplary text, given in both French and English. While each chapter does stand alone well enough to be read independently, they vary in their structure, language, and in the reading techniques they demonstrate, which makes the volume as a whole equally enjoyable (and synergistically more instructive) to read straight through.

Within his survey of the history of French literature, Nelson also implicitly weaves a rough history of literary criticism and its tools by quoting scholarship by critics from throughout the twentieth century,

from Erich Auerbach and Isaiah Berlin, to Jean Starobinski, Gérard Defaux, Peter Brooks, Terence Cave, Laurence Porter, and Terry Eagleton (to give just a small sample). However, Nelson's discussion of literary scholarship is subtle and seamless enough that the casual reader might benefit from this tacit primer on literary criticism itself without even realizing it. Nelson's short examples of textual interpretation also provide practical instruction in the art of reading, particularly from a narratological perspective, and in such a way that follows the historical development of relationships between authorial voice, narrator/narratee, and other key concepts that the advanced undergraduate or beginning graduate student will find immediately illuminating. The volume begins with a riveting and astute discussion of Villon's use of irony and authorial inconsistency in the *Testament* to undermine authority in general, and uses this as a way to illustrate the constructed nature of the literary "I," with a nod to the scholarship of Tony Hunt and Jane Taylor. This thread continues throughout much of the volume, as the reader can track the evolution of how the construct of the authorial voice or narrator is problematized through Montaigne, Rousseau, Diderot, Flaubert, Rimbaud, and Marguerite Duras, for example, or see how other forms of literature such as the fable or the epistolary novel function according to entirely different sets of protocols. While the book aims to instruct and inspire the non-professional, part of the appeal of these miniature close readings is that they often contain little gems that even the professional literary scholar can appreciate, as in Nelson's discussion of windows in *Madame Bovary*, verb tenses in *L'Assommoir*, or the productive ambiguities of seventeenth-century vocabulary in La Fontaine's fable "Le loup et l'agneau."

Nelson's prose also bears telltale signs of a master pedagogue, as it often coaches the uninitiated reader in lit crit style by employing subtle (but never tedious) redundancy or casual definitions of terms, as in the following passage from his chapter on Molière:

"The animating principle of Molière's theatre is his exploitation of incongruity: a constant double vision, which depicts the unreasonable alongside the suggestion of its opposite. The 'high' comedies provide grounds for the statement that Molière builds his theatre round monomaniacs: characters who are obsessed with something, whether marital chastity or money or health or learning or social status, which so dominates their thinking that their family threatens to disintegrate around them: 'my mother, brother, wife and children could die,' says Orgon, 'and I wouldn't lose a moment's sleep'" (p. 44).

Furthermore, Nelson's occasional comparisons between authors (e.g., Montaigne and Rousseau; Flaubert and Sartre; Hugo and Baudelaire; Corneille and Madame de Lafayette; Balzac, Marx, and Stendhal) or literary events (e.g., the stagings of *Hernani* and *Ubu roi*, respectively) make useful connections that can aid the non-specialist in clarifying or remembering basic concepts introduced at different points of the book. This work is obviously the fruit of a long career of appreciating, teaching, and inspiring appreciation for the works it examines, and deserves consideration for its potential to inspire further investigation into the subject and practice of reading French literature.

The book's greatest strength remains conjoined, however, to its greatest weakness. While Nelson writes with a contagious enthusiasm about those authors whom he likes best, it is worth asking whether and to what extent a work of introduction should reflect any one scholar's particular short list of favorites. Addressing his choice of which authors to cover in this admittedly cursory presentation of an abundant and rich field, he states in the preface that:

"The selection of writers treated is determined partly by personal preference and taste, modified by two criteria: they should all, by common consent or arguably, be major writers (though there is no suggestion that a particular kind of 'canon' is being promoted); and, within a balanced chronological framework, they should all provide compelling insights into their historical and cultural moment" (pp. ix-x).

If we take this statement at face value, Nelson would seem to have begun with his favorite writers, and then eliminated those which, by some unspecified criteria of arguability (arguments which are never in fact presented) or consent (by who knows what electorate), were not considered "major" enough, or which

seemed to have too little to say about their times, or which did not make the cut because they caused the stuffing of the historical pillow to bunch up too much in one lump. In most scholarship, the process by which an author arrives at determining their object of study is far less important than the relevance of the scholarship itself—indeed, the zealous investment in seeking answers to questions of personal interest for idiosyncratic and ultimately mysterious reasons often drives the most thorough and interesting work. However, in the case of a general survey of the field of French literature—a field which Nelson makes no attempt to define, even for his particular purposes—questions such as “personal preference” and “taste” would seem far less useful; indeed, suspicious.

This choice is especially true in the twenty-first century, in the wake of late twentieth-century histories of French literature that have already abandoned the Great Men paradigm in favor of more explicitly pluralistic, fractured, and multiply-determined concepts of “history,” “French,” and “literature.” Collective efforts ranging from the highly ambitious *A New History of French Literature* (edited by Denis Hollier)^[1] to the much narrower *Cambridge Companion to the French Novel* (edited by Timothy Unwin)^[2] began by addressing and problematizing the ways in which we have spoken, and can possibly speak, of a “French literature”—and thus the failures attendant upon any such effort, however intelligently conceived, take productive part in the illustration of the problem itself. Nelson’s contribution, on the other hand, makes no acknowledgement—however implicit—of the contemporary struggles and negotiations of just what “French literature” even is, and what the functions of that term have been and might be. This is a crucial omission, since it inevitably leads the uninformed reader by default to understand French literature essentially as those characteristics which can be found in the authors which Nelson has presented for reasons which, apart from the one vague sentence quoted above, are simply not made manifest.

The most obvious shortcomings of Nelson’s presentation appear as early as the table of contents: whereas contemporary histories of French literature have tended to organize chapters around important historical moments, themes, or other nodes of importance other than some individual genius, thereby illustrating by their very structure that literature as such is a product of a nexus of factors both real and arbitrarily highlighted, *The Cambridge Introduction to French Literature* has thirty chapters, twenty-eight of which are male authors’ last names, and one of which is Madame de Lafayette. In spite of the last thirty years of scholarship on the role of women in the development of French letters, Nelson’s survey from the shoulders of great men (and one woman) would lead any uninformed reader to believe (perhaps unconsciously) that French literature is ultimately the product of individual (largely male) talents who have appeared regularly throughout history, made their mark, and then walked off stage.

Certainly, some individual women could have stood proudly alongside (or even replaced) the likes of La Fontaine, Jarry, Céline, and Beckett—Marie de France, Christine de Pizan, Marguerite de Navarre, Françoise de Graffigny, and George Sand spring immediately to mind, for example—but the problem stems as much from the focalization on individual famous figures as it does on the selection of which ones deserve their own chapters. French literature does not consist, after all, of a finite number of exceptional individuals whose influence has trickled down, but rather of an ecosystem of literary acts contributing to the ongoing evolution of a semantic and aesthetic field of discourse. Given the increasingly diverse demographic of students and the broader public who take an interest in (or teach) French literature, it is difficult to imagine that this book properly addresses their motivation to do so, or that they might not suspect something amiss in its unstated implication that women really had very little to do with French literature before the late twentieth century.

Whereas the final chapter, “French literature into the twenty-first century,” contains a three-and-a-half-page subsection on “Duras and other women writers,” this late-game concession only reinforces the idea that French literature as such has always been (until recently) that which great men make, as evidenced by their particular exemplary works. Even the way in which Nelson discusses *La Princesse de Clèves* seems teleologically calibrated toward this end; contrast the following two passages, the first of which refers to the legacy of Madame de Lafayette, and the second of which refers to that of Voltaire:

“Combining elements of the romance and the novella—prose genres that were previously dominant—*La Princesse de Clèves* created a new model for fiction: the type of psychological novel (*roman d'analyse*), foregrounding the inner lives of its characters and the relationships between them, that would become such an important strand of the French literary tradition. It looks forward to the fiction of Laclos and Stendhal” (p. 54).

“His [Voltaire's] works are what Jean-Paul Sartre would later call ‘committed literature,’ and they helped to establish a tradition that led directly from Voltaire via Hugo and Zola to Sartre and Camus” (p. 61).

Whereas Voltaire appears as a leader who lit the torch of modern *littérature engagée*, Madame de Lafayette comes across as a synthesizer of earlier (male) products who was innovative in her ability to foreshadow what later (male) authors would do with her intervention. This sort of language, along with other patriarchal expressions such as “the changes in man’s view of himself and the world” (pg. 179), are less troubling, however, than the fact that women themselves have very little voice in the book. Whereas Nelson constantly quotes a wide range of scholars throughout, and whereas his bibliography is full of works by female scholars, only two or three female scholars are actually quoted in the text (Priscilla Clark on Voltaire, Odette de Mourgues on Racine, and Susan Sontag on Barthes). In spite of his assertion in the final chapter that “The most significant general development in French literature in the second half of the twentieth century was the growth of writing by women” (pg. 231), Nelson’s relative silence on the great contributions of female scholars to the appreciation of French literature in general ironically rehearses the very marginalization of women’s voices whose eventual end his quick summary in the last chapter dutifully pretends to recount.

The subject of *la francophonie* is given a page and a half of competent discussion at the end, after referring the reader to Patrick Corcoran’s 2007 *Cambridge Introduction to Francophone Literature*[3], which in the context of the series might understandably excuse Nelson from the onerous task of having to summarize an enormously complex field of study. Instead, Nelson devotes the bulk of the final chapter to a number of topics with which he is more familiar: the *nouveau roman* and *nouvelle critique*; Michel Tournier and the return to traditional narrative; OULIPO writers; and autobiography/autofiction, making for an eclectic but interesting smorgasbord of late twentieth-century literary developments. One cannot help but wonder if the book as a whole might have been improved by organizing the entire volume along similar lines. But apart from the brief mention of Tournier’s 1967 *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*, which retells Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* from the perspective of the native islander Friday, notably absent throughout the volume is any real impact of the late twentieth century’s rereading of classic texts with a postcolonial consciousness.

This omission is most notable in the chapter on Rimbaud. In the course of his reading of “Le bateau ivre,” Nelson conspicuously fails to acknowledge any racial or political valence to the image of howling *Peaux-Rouges* nailing the poet’s barge men naked to color posts, restricting his analysis to the politically neutral psychological dimensions of the verse: “The redskins might be taken to represent the wild imaginative elements in a child’s life, the things that are not part of morality or a classical education; while the coloured poles to which the elements of control are nailed suggest the colours that are about to become part of the boat’s life” (p. 156). The Eurocentric perspective which Nelson’s silence on this issue implies resonates all the more strongly when, at the end of the chapter, he refers to Rimbaud’s “charting of totally unexplored regions in the Horn of Africa” (p. 160). While this sort of tone deafness was frequently overlooked during the last century, in 2015 it appears as the vestige of an earlier era, clumsy at best, and at worst, dangerous.

In short, with the exception of a page on Marie NDiaye, two pages on Michel Houellebecq, and a small minority of scholarly works cited in the bibliography, there is very little of this new *Cambridge Introduction to French Literature* that is truly of the twenty-first century; in fact, it reads like a great collection of individual articles conceived during the twentieth century, for the twentieth-century classroom (though

largely still usable), and belatedly fused into an excellent primer for the twentieth-century undergraduate who is considering a Master's degree or Ph.D. program in French. That is not to say that this frequently brilliant yet frustratingly incomplete volume is entirely obsolete; rather, it should be taken with its imbalances clearly in view, alongside significant supplementary materials. Perhaps its most significant flaw, after all, is its title; were this inspired and often inspiring work to be presented as anything but a broad representation of "French literature," its merits would shine all the more brightly.

NOTES

[1] Denis Hollier, ed., *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[2] Timothy Unwin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the French Novel from 1800 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[3] Patrick Corcoran, *The Cambridge Introduction to Francophone Literature* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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