

book review

Middlebrow Studies and Its Discontents

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Beth Driscoll

The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century

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The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century, is an excellent introduction to the mechanisms of literary appreciation and distribution in contemporary culture. With admirable clarity, Beth Driscoll defines the eight characteristics that attach to middlebrow objects and practices: middle-class, reverential, commercial, mediated, feminised, emotional, recreational and

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earnest. She then uses these characteristics to analyse four case studies of literary middlebrowness at work: Oprah's Book Club, the Harry Potter phenomenon, the Man Booker Prize and (Australian) book festivals.

Driscoll's methodology is productively diverse. Her primary research material includes tweets, newspaper reviews, satisfaction surveys, Facebook pages, online reading discussion boards, correspondence from archives and even betting. As for secondary material, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work on cultural capital and the hierarchy of taste is foundational but Driscoll also incorporates a wide range of scholarship from adolescent literacy, cultural studies, literary history and media studies. Exhaustively researched, Driscoll's book both intervenes in general debates about the middlebrow and adds to the specific scholarly traditions that frame her case studies, which have been chosen to give a detailed and thoughtful overview of the 'new literary middlebrow'.

The first chapter discusses the many iterations of Oprah's Book Club (OBC), placing it in the broader context of women's book clubs and women's culture. Driscoll provides an excellent overview of the controversies surrounding OBC which come into new critical relief when approached through the lens of middlebrow studies, particularly concerns about Winfrey's outsized influence in the literary field and internal scuffles such as Jonathan Franzen's critique of the book club and rescinded invitation and James Frey's debunked 'memoir', *A Million Little Pieces*. The concerted focus on the question of gender and the middlebrow—a recurring theme in much middlebrow scholarship—makes this chapter the most successful application of the eight middlebrow characteristics identified in the introduction. In comparison, the second chapter on Harry Potter sometimes feels like it is lacking a central object of analysis. It considers the 'phenomenon' of Potter, but focuses on reviewers' and secondary literacy educators' debates about J.K. Rowling's novels, rather than the practices and beliefs of Harry Potter readers and fans. It is, in other words, more about the reactions of certain critics, pro and con, than about the Harry Potter stories or the devoted fandom that accompanies them. The third and fourth chapters, on the Man Booker Prize and the Melbourne Writers Festival, respectively, are Driscoll's most original scholarly contribution, grounded as they are in archival research (the Man Booker Prize) and participant surveys (the Melbourne Writers Festival). In these two chapters, Driscoll pushes beyond more familiar examples of

middlebrow literary culture to include established institutions associated with the larger literary scene. While many literary writers seek the publicity associated with book festivals and the commercial success attendant on being shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, whatever controversies surface around the invitation and selection process, these prestige venues and awards typically stand clear of the middlebrow taint that attaches to OBC in the American context.

The case studies are sometimes inhibited by the speed with which Driscoll moves and the breadth of ground she wants to cover. Sometimes her critique of key theorists is handled too quickly and declines the opportunity to provide more nuance and analysis. This is particularly noticeable when she details Bourdieu's critique of 'corporate sponsorship ... as a threat to literary autonomy'. (130) After summarising Bourdieu's position, Driscoll states that he tends to 'overstate the influence of corporate sponsorship on prizes', going on to say 'Bourdieu's language of embattlement is misleading, since the interpenetration of art and commerce is not a looming threat but part of the fabric of the literary economy'. (131) Bourdieu is foundational to Driscoll's approach in this book yet this critique, buried in the middle of a case study, raises serious questions about his taxonomy of cultural capital. While Driscoll agrees that Bourdieu's account of corporate sponsorship has been usefully applied to the Man Book Prize by Sharon Norris, she argues it is 'more productive to see corporate sponsorship of the Man Booker Prize by Booker McConnell and, later, the Man Group as facilitating the interaction of commercial and literary values'. (131) I am brimming with questions. What makes this analysis more 'productive'? What are the different values accorded the 'commercial' and the 'literary'? How does this 'interaction' determine literary taste formation? But Driscoll has already moved on, as she often does when mentioning new concepts or ideas regarding the middlebrow.

The confident clarity that is *The New Literary Middlebrow's* greatest strength becomes a problem the more it becomes clear that the middlebrow is culturally contested and often contradictory terrain. For example, that the middlebrow is both 'mediated' and 'commercial' is often cause for tension, especially when expert intervention about what is 'good' comes up against the full range of marketing strategies, including advertising and social media directed at those who purchase books and the franchised tie-ins that now accompany them. The question of the role

of the reader is predominant in much middlebrow scholarship that typically concerns itself with readerly identification with characters and authors, vicarious experience and the desire for emotional truth in fictional and nonfictional form, self-help advice and therapeutic catharsis through reading. This focus on the reader's experience is consistent with the 'earnest' and 'emotional' characteristics of middlebrow literary industries but often at odds with their 'reverential' and 'mediated' quality. The fact that middlebrow *readers* are feminised and dismissed, while the mediating figures (such as reviewers) are often imagined as masculine, once again brings up the fraught place of gender in middlebrow studies. Though gender is central to her discussion of Oprah's Book Club, and readers come up constantly in subsequent chapters, Driscoll doesn't connect these two dots and make actual readers, or reading practices, a central focus. She doesn't, for instance, interview readers in person or online to learn how they conceive of and use their reading experiences or the part that 'mediators' play in their relation to books they may or may not read, borrow or purchase. Though reading is constantly invoked, it is rarely the central focus of Driscoll's analysis. Sometimes reading seems taken for granted and thus presents a missed opportunity to complicate the analysis, including addressing the question of whether or not reading (or conventional literacy) is any longer a necessary prerequisite for participation in middlebrow literary culture.

Indeed, for a book that begins by establishing an illuminating rubric for understanding the 'new literary middlebrow', it is remarkable how often the case studies references qualities that do not appear in the initial list of defining characteristics. In addition to the eight qualities posted at the outset, the middlebrow is also 'flexible', 'global', 'technological' and 'reverential of literary classics'. I don't mean to criticise this expanded list; it is to Driscoll's credit that she knows the full range of issues and complexities in middlebrow studies. However, she nonetheless tends to make definitive statements about the nature of the middlebrow that contradict something asserted previously about the middlebrow, not just in the introduction but sometimes earlier in the same chapter.

This comes out most clearly in her use of the term 'literary' which, as you might expect, comes up constantly: 'another of the middlebrow features of reviewing is its reverence for elite literary culture'; (103) 'the media introduces commercial

pressures to literary culture'; (135) 'changed attitude amongst the literati'; (140) or 'literary fiction and poetry ... has the most cultural capital'. (160) Clearly 'literary' is functioning as shorthand to indicate a broader cultural conversation in which there is an implied denunciation of whatever is deemed 'unliterary'. But Driscoll doesn't take the time to define what she, or others, mean when they call something 'literary', nor does she acknowledge what a multiple and contested terrain the 'literary' is. Even writers and critics—that is, those with professional reasons to have a working definition of literariness to hand—rarely have clear standards they can articulate. Driscoll comes closest to acknowledging this when she quotes Australian publisher Louise Adler, who provocatively asks: 'Why pretend that literary judgments are anything more than a matter of individual taste, shaped by a knowledge of the literary culture, tempered by robust conversation with equally educated but idiosyncratic judges?' (129) Why indeed? Because giving up this pretence robs one of a useful tool to establish one's cultural capital and dismiss others whose taste formations are not the same as one's own.

Though the question of the 'literary' is central to Driscoll's book the broader issue of how the 'middlebrow' and the 'literary' intersect could be better defined. As a starting point I would contend that all literary culture is 'middlebrow' because the literary is never independent of cultural or commercial concerns, at least not when it is published by a press and enters the public domain. All writers participate in a commercial system, are 'branded' and marketed, and engage either personally or by proxy with new media and promotion. Publishers send their authors to book festivals, want them to be selected for major literary prizes and adopted by book clubs. Though not all authors become J.K. Rowling-esque celebrities, those who write literary fiction are every bit as commercial as those who write in other trade genres such as children's literature or chick lit. Put another way, the Man Booker Prize is as much a media whore as Oprah's Book Club. In this sense the implication of Driscoll's book is radical: the 'new literary middlebrow' has always encompassed 'the literary' howsoever the tastemakers that police the latter wish to distance themselves from the former.

Driscoll is a media studies scholar, not a literary critic, so it isn't surprising that she isn't as interested in the contested nature of the literary as I am. Nonetheless, her reliance on a faux-stable notion of the 'literary' is surprising in a

book that sees ‘flexibility’, not purity, as a defining characteristic of the field. The repeated invocation of the ‘literary’ as if it were a known entity mutes the broader intention of the book, particular in the case studies which lack the clarity of the afterword in which Driscoll finally takes the gloves off. It is worth quoting her final paragraph in full:

This study has not just described the new literary middlebrow, but defended it. Any discussion of the middlebrow must acknowledge the pejorative uses of the term: the suggestion of elite disapproval is part of the word’s undeniable magnetism. Certainly, the agents and practices of the new literary middlebrow are often disparaged in the debates of the contemporary literary field. Yet as elite culture becomes more marginalized and the middlebrow expands to tolerate more works of popular culture, the extremes of the literary field become less significant and the middlebrow assumes cultural dominance. The new literary middlebrow is a powerful and widespread cultural phenomenon, and a source of value and satisfaction for an increasing number of readers. With its flexibility, market power and cultural appeal, the new literary middlebrow is defining the future of reading. (201)

Middlebrow culture, other words, *is* literary culture. Not just because ‘elite culture becomes more marginalized’, but because elite culture is as much a commercial ‘brand’ as any genre fiction. Driscoll’s account of the ‘new literary middlebrow’ makes this an essential book for literary critics and cultural scholars who want to understand contemporary reading culture.

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