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Morgane Cadieu. On Both Sides of the Tracks: Social Mobility in Contemporary French Literature. The University of Chicago Press, 2024.

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Abstract

Review of Morgane Cadieu. *On Both Sides of the Tracks: Social Mobility in Contemporary French Literature*. The University of Chicago Press, 2024. 362 pp.

Keywords

French and Francophone Studies, social class, social mobility

Morgane Cadieu. *On Both Sides of the Tracks: Social Mobility in Contemporary French Literature*. The University of Chicago Press, 2024. 362 pp.

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, Occupy, and the Yellow Vests movement, social class has resurged as a sociopolitical question that animates public debate and invites renewed scrutiny and study across the academy. With her sweeping and rigorous book *On Both Sides of the Tracks*, Morgane Cadieu offers a remarkable contribution to these discussions by demonstrating the importance and specificity of contemporary French literature to the narrative of social mobility. If history, sociology, and economics are all fields that have engaged in longstanding dialogue with literature about matters of social mobility and class, Cadieu shows that they ultimately treat literary texts solely as receptacles of content, thus sapping them of their literariness by failing to attend to their form. These fields also tend to eschew encounters with twenty-first-century literature, often limiting the scope of their literary engagement to earlier canonical authors and texts, such as works by Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, and Émile Zola. *On Both Sides of the Tracks*, therefore, is concerned with form over and above content, focused on how contemporary French literature unspools the narrative of social mobility in its formal details. To further distinguish her approach from those of the social sciences, Cadieu tracks the formal depiction of social mobility through a figure she neologically terms a *parvenant* rather than the more commonly used *transfuge* ‘defector’. Drawn from the French verb *parvenir*—meaning to reach, to attain, or to achieve—Cadieu’s neologism directly resembles the verb’s present participle form, thus emphasizing movement over fixity. The term *parvenant* encapsulates the literary and formal thrust of her study, while also allowing her to consider social mobility as a processual, multidirectional movement between classes that does not necessarily conclude in immutable social affiliation, thereby complicating linear (liberal) narratives of strictly upward mobility.

On Both Sides of the Tracks traces the various paths of the *parvenant* through contemporary works by Annie Ernaux, Édouard Louis, Marie Ndiaye, Michel Houellebecq, Christine Angot, Kaoutar Harchi, and Virginie Despentes. Instead of restricting her study to novels, Cadieu’s sources also include nonfiction works, interviews, theoretical texts, petitions, photography, films, and even paintings produced or engaged by these authors and their contemporaries. Such an interdisciplinary corpus attests to the fact that the contemporary narrative of social mobility is lent expression across a diverse range of formats. This already expansive corpus is further supplemented by canonical works such as Balzac’s *La Comédie Humaine* (*The Human Comedy*) and Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), among others. Cadieu offers close readings and brief surveys of these well-known texts to demonstrate how the *parvenant*—and thus the narrative of social mobility more broadly—has been updated and transformed over

time. For instance, Cadieu opens her book by showing how Balzac's character Eugène de Rastignac functions as a literary archetype of social mobility that has returned to the pages of contemporary literature through a largely educational framework, before closing the text by arguing that he has also been socially downgraded in the work of Houellebecq, Desportes, and Julia Deck. Elsewhere, she locates the *parvenant* in intriguing and sometimes unexpected textual sites: mud; the body; the figure of the maid; the symbolism of doors and thresholds; and the metaphor of the train. The text sometimes suffers from its comprehensive scope, as it also includes brief references to works—such as J.D. Vance's memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* and Bong Joon-Ho's film *Parasite*—that largely feel underdeveloped or unnecessary. This aside, Cadieu maintains a keen attention to form and textuality throughout, methodologically foregrounding poetics, rhetorics, and stylistics in each chapter.

It is hard to overstate the brilliance and precision of Cadieu's close readings as she masterfully guides the reader through intricate formal analyses that crisscross texts, authors, and time periods. Take the book's chapter on maids, which features an examination of Ernaux's use of dashes in a single line from an interview about Guy de Maupassant's *Une vie (A Life)*. Discussing the fact that Ernaux uses a subordinate clause to refer to the servant character Rosalie, Cadieu argues that the dashes are suffused with social significance, as they also suggest the servant's subordination. She goes on to assert convincingly that for Ernaux, however, these dashes function as rungs of a social and literary ladder. Or, in the subsequent chapter on doors, Cadieu deftly demonstrates that Angot's insistence on the imperfect tense in her work should not be viewed as a minor detail, as it is bound up with social meaning, offering a verbal elasticity that allows Angot to effectively depict a liminality that marks her social mobility.

On Both Sides of the Tracks abounds with these kinds of rich, finely crafted close readings that refuse to neglect even the tiniest of details. While this makes the book deeply engrossing and instructive, it also has the occasional side effect of producing a dizzying readerly experience as one follows Cadieu through a web of interlocking connections and social meanings obtained in her formal analyses. This is the case, for instance, in the opening sections of its fourth chapter, where—in but a four-paragraph span—Cadieu engages works by Flaubert, Balzac, Proust, Stendhal, Georges Sand, Octave Mirbeau, and Jean Genet. If anything, this minor quibble testifies to the book's complexity and sophistication and suggests that it is a text whose depth and detail are best appreciated when read closely and methodically, in concert with Cadieu's careful analytical approach and her sharp attention to the significance of formal details that are anything but textual minutiae. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find many works of literary history or criticism that match the erudition and eloquence of *On Both Sides of the Tracks*. It is an exemplary book of staggering breadth and depth that demonstrates that

contemporary literature has a great deal to say about class, social (im)mobility, and social emancipation, if only we would bother to look more closely at the sonorous links, punctuation patterns, and syntactical choices deployed by some of the most important authors of our day.

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