Journal of Popular Romance Studies
published in partnership with the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance

Driscoll, Beth. *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century*. Pp. vi, 234. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. £64.99 (Softcover) ISBN: 9781349486847.

Review by Angela Toscano

Published online: March 2020
http://www.jprstudies.org

In Beth Driscoll's *The New Literary Middlebrow,* she re-examines both the term middlebrow as well as its surrounding cultural practices in our contemporary moment. While middlebrow is a term that has effectively functioned as an insult, Driscoll argues that there is much value in it as a way of conceptualizing the shifting relationships among tastemakers, media, readers, and the book marketplace. Her study, then, is an attempt to "render visible the complexity and value of literary practices that are too readily dismissed: women's reading, children's reading, holiday reading . . . This study names and comprehends the new middlebrow structures of book production and circulation, and is a resource for all those who care about reading" (4).

Driscoll's survey of the new literary middlebrow is useful for scholars of popular romance in two central ways: first, she offers an account of the middlebrow in the first chapter that both narrates its historical origins and defines its features. This account, along with the outline of the middlebrow's characteristics, provides a productive framework for thinking about the intersection of reading practices, publishing trends, and aesthetics: aesthetics which are often determined by an elite culture. This framework or taxonomy of the middlebrow is not meant to be a prescriptive formulation, but rather a fluid description. Driscoll invokes Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblance in discussing her taxonomy of the middlebrow, suggesting that what ties these books and practices together is not a single, inherent quality but rather a cluster of similar attributes.

Second, Driscoll's method of taxonimizing the middlebrow even as she simultaneously historicizes it provides a pattern card of methodology useful to scholars of popular romance, who often find themselves caught between the more rigid textual approaches of structuralism and narratology, and the more sociological approaches of historicism and cultural studies. Indeed, Driscoll's opening chapter is probably the most broadly applicable of the monograph as it provides a lucid introduction to what the middlebrow is, how it has operated within literary and cultural communities, and the characteristics that middlebrow texts and practices share. She says, "The value of a text is always influenced by its dissemination and consumption" (9) and that the "middlebrow's

expansive, colonizing activities continually shift the boundaries between cultural categories, while the new relationships between mass audiences and intermediaries recalibrate the lines of authority" (17).

Like Regis in *A Natural History of the Romance*, Driscoll defines the middlebrow using eight key features. They are: the middlebrow is middle-class; the middlebrow is reverential; the middlebrow is commercial; the middlebrow is mediated; the middlebrow is feminized; the middlebrow is emotional; the middlebrow is recreational; and the middlebrow is earnest. While this is an "imprecise and contested term; at the same time, it has an indisputable potency" (43), a claim that I would argue is transferrable to oft-used terms in popular romance studies.

The bulk of Driscoll's book takes the provisional and fluid definitions of the middlebrow she outlines in the first chapter and explores them through case studies. The second chapter deals with the literary meditation of book clubs, specifically the Oprah Book Club. There Driscoll contextualizes Oprah Winfrey's influence within the larger history of women's reading practices, noting the ways in which shared reading is often a feminized experience that is intended to elicit particular emotional responses even as it is strongly mediated through the act of communal interpretation.

The third chapter explores the way in which educational and pedagogical approaches to the Harry Potter novels, as well as the system of book reviews and critical readings in newspapers and magazines, act as gatekeepers to elite culture. Children's literature often becomes a site of contention over the value of reading and its effects; as a result, its regulators (teachers, pastors, parents) become mediators of literary value. In so doing, Driscoll demonstrates how gatekeeping practices shift to accommodate debates about what and how young readers should read. This is true not only of pedagogical practices, but reviewers and critics who reaffirm the value of the middlebrow as both therapy and entertainment. Both pedagogy and reviewing highlight how "the new literary middlebrow . . . co-opts even bestselling genre fiction into its model of literacy" (118).

In the fourth chapter, Driscoll explores the effect the literary prize has on definitions and valuations of middlebrow literature. Specifically, Driscoll looks at the Man Booker Prize, drawing on "historical and contemporary journalistic accounts to explore the participation of prizes in the new literary middlebrow" ultimately revealing that prizes articulate the ways in which the middlebrow is "intensely mediated, commercially oriented and reverent towards legitimate culture" (120). Driscoll points out that the Man Booker Prize is neither a marketing tool nor an elite authority, but rather embodies the "tensions and cooperations between prestige and commercial impact" (151).

Finally, the concluding chapter explores "The Middlebrow Pleasure of Literary Festivals." As Driscoll notes, these festivals "are stages for discord in the literary, cultural and social fields" (153). Criticisms of literary festivals dismiss them as "commerce-driven and are snide about their predominantly female, middle-class audiences" reinforcing "the fact that festivals are middlebrow institutions, working outside legitimate sites of higher education and offering a more accessible kind of cultural experience" (192). Accessibility to literary culture seems to be, in the grand view of Driscoll's work, one of the principle purposes of the new literary middlebrow, and while these practices might be limited, they "provide their core constituency with socially, emotionally and intellectually engaging cultural experiences" (193).

Driscoll's volume is an eminently readable and illuminating study of the middlebrow as it operates within our current culture. Moreover, she provides a flexible and rigorous approach to a fluid, culturally shifting category of texts that I found extremely beneficial for thinking through the way literary classifications are formed on the shifting grounds of history and language. Similarly, her use of Bourdieu's best ideas while also critiquing the more suspect aspects of his approach to aesthetics, demonstrates a sharp and incisive way of using theorists—theorists who often suffer from a myopia about the value of art and literature that falls outside a narrow, culturally elite system of assessment. All in all, I would recommend Driscoll's volume to scholars studying bestsellers, publishing, reading practices, and the circulation of texts within the culture, not only for its methodology but for its illumination of contemporary literary engagement.

References

Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.