

Online Reviews

Du Plessis, Eric H. *The Nineteenth-Century French Novel*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2013. Pp. 180. ISBN: 978-7734-4498-0

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In *The Nineteenth-Century French Novel*, Eric H. du Plessis undertakes the formidable task of summarizing a selection of French novels from the nineteenth century, a period during which the novel became the most important and popular literary genre. Du Plessis does not propose any comprehensive argument of his own concerning the novel in nineteenth-century France. Rather, the goal of his book is to provide the reader with a basic understanding of the forty-four novels selected, in addition to a brief analysis of each text's literary significance. *The Nineteenth-Century French Novel* will therefore appeal to graduate students in French or to the amateur reader of French literature seeking to gain a basic understanding of the breadth of novels written during the nineteenth century in France.

In his introduction, du Plessis candidly states the purpose of his book. *The Nineteenth-Century French Novel* is not to be used as a replacement for reading these forty-four French novels, but rather, as a study tool for researchers or curious individuals wishing to ease the arduous task of sifting through thousands of pages of literature without any guidance. He points out the major themes of each work, and furthers interest in and knowledge of nineteenth-century French literature. Du Plessis thus seems to be acutely aware of the audience for his book, as he addresses the desire among graduate students for short summaries of important French novels in English translation.

The informed student of French literature will be unsurprised to see chapters devoted to some of the period's hallmark works including *René*, *Le Rouge et le Noir*, *Le Père Goriot*, *Madame Bovary*, *Les Misérables*, *L'Éducation sentimentale*, *À rebours*, and *Germinal*. A few lesser-known works by important authors such as *Delphine*, by Madame de Staël, and *Colomba*, by Prosper Mérimée, are also included. Furthermore, du Plessis resists the tendency to remain solely with these well-studied works by including novels by more obscure writers. Nevertheless, a quick scan of the book's table of contents will reveal a diverse list of authors and titles, with all the major novelists of the period represented at least once. By incorporating familiar novels along with some lesser-known works, Du Plessis simultaneously embraces, defies, and even challenges the traditional academic canon, thus leading to a nuanced understanding of the French novel during the nineteenth century.

Du Plessis's structure allows the reader to progress easily through the text, be it chronologically or indiscriminately, reading individual chapters as a reference source. Each chapter begins with a summary of the novel in question, usually one to two pages in length, and concludes with the author's analysis of the novel's strengths and weaknesses. The succinctness of each chapter is a real strength; Du Plessis is able to include the most pertinent plot information of each text without troubling the reader with too many superfluous details. The author is also attentive to the qualities that make each text unique while situating it in terms of its significance during the nineteenth century as a whole. In many ways, du Plessis's summaries reflect traditional critical accounts of some of the century's most famous novels. Still, the author makes an effort to extend beyond the textbook interpretations of each work, offering his personal opinions and analyses regarding many of the century's most beloved novels. This subjective quality of the book may surprise some readers. However, du Plessis states self-assuredly in his introduction that he is simply offering one person's interpretation of each work. Thus,

the author encourages the reader to make his or her own assessment following the reading of each original text in its entirety. Nevertheless, it is difficult at times to escape the persuasive confidence exhibited by some of Du Plessis's commentaries, for example those in which he overtly bemoans the length of certain novels or their purported literary failure in terms of plot. Highlighting some of the century's greatest literary "failures" is, however, part of du Plessis's strategy. As he notes in his introduction: "In hindsight, literary failures are an integral part of the intellectual legacy of any given age" (xv). In this way, du Plessis seeks to promote a vision, albeit subjective, of the nineteenth-century novel that resides not only in the century's greatest successes, but also that demonstrates an understanding of the period's limitations.

Still, the summaries contain some inconsistencies. For instance, some chapters (those on *Volupté*, *La Chartreuse de Parme*, *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, *Les Souffrances de Professeur Delteil*, *Dominique*, and *Les Misérables*) lack an impartial plot summary before delving into the author's personal evaluation of the text. Moreover, while du Plessis claims to "provide in-depth evaluations of forty-four French novels most representative of nineteenth-century classic fiction," the succinct structure of each chapter may not allow for such a comprehensive appraisal of each work. Nonetheless, written in an accessible style and utilizing an effective structure, *The Nineteenth-Century French Novel* provides accurate and concise knowledge of the novels selected, leaving the reader free to explore these works further in his or her research, study, or leisure time.

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