

The bon marche essay

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The Bon Marche Michael Miller's book, *The Bon Marche: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920*, is an expansive and interesting look back on a era of Parisian history that is best represented by its then-current trend and social innovation, the department store. The book gives a fascinating account of the store from its beginning to eventual common place status in 1914. The book gives an insight on the factors in which the store saw success, such as the management, the labor, and new marketing. It also gives light to the social factors that made the store possible (i. e education and economy). *Bon Marche* is a book about the change in the 19th century French market and the effect it then had on the bourgeoisie class. The book starts, with its first part, by showing the Bon Marche's emerging anew within Parisian businesses. This recreation of an older store into what would become the world's largest department store involved an evolution of traditional store culture. It required rethinking of original norms and practices in that current business culture. Before the revolution, stores in France were regulated via a guild system which created limits on what you could sell, where and how you could sell it, and how you were allowed to advertise it.

The second part of the book can be seen as the real heft of the work as it was written with a grandiose sense of detail and was amply documented history. This part sees the Bon Marche within the new social and business environments, detailing the managerial practices that made the house of Boucicaut rise far above its competitors. Aristide and Marguerite Boucicaut are depicted with a sort of fundamental compromised attitude towards their employees. They are not show as either pro-employee or pro-middle class,

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and neither are they shown as anti-worker. The book instead depicts the Boucicauts as ma and pa store owners (albeit in a large department store), employing a traditional system that was simply willing to adapt as needed to any change it should encounter. The Boucicaut's were able to create a relationship with their employees with a sense of comradery, or family. Aristide and Marguerite established the new Bon Marche with a managerial tactic of benevolence to answer a need to maintain control over the store's performance and progress. The employees of the Bon Marche were some of the best paid employees in all of Paris, as well did they receive great in-house benefits.

In 1876, Aristide Boucicaut announced the establishment of a financial fund for employees. This was designed to make the employees apart of his "house," or family. The methods proved so effective that even the Boucicauts' eventual successors (though most having made their way up the ranks of the store) continued their system. In part three, Miller gives life to the Bon Marche; the store slowly but surely becomes a part of the bourgeoisie class and social culture, giving them such practices as displaying art, selling nouveautes, a library of books, and a venue for concerts. The store attracts a certain kind of upper-class. They wished to be able to take part in something as close to the middle-class as possible. The store added more middle-class employees and merchandising items that personified middle-class values; the Bon Marche helped construct the new idea of how the middle-class looked and acted. The Bon Marche is a well-researched, well-drafted, and well-organized book of whose argumentation is linear and sequential.

The book would excite business historians with the ideas of merchandising practices, marketing techniques, business strategies, and market forces. In the end, after a riveting look at the life of the house that Boucicaut built, *The Bon Marche* achieves the goal of telling a 19th century social history that strongly links the firm's rise to social and cultural trends that sparked along with the human side of the story that made the store a possible success.

Emile Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise*, is a novel that tells the story of Denise Baudu, a 20 year old woman who comes to Paris to work at the department store *Au Bonheur des Dames*.

The novel is set from the employees' perspective, and describes in detail the thirteen hour workdays, the less than sought after food, and the hardly livable lodgings for the female staff. The department store the novel is set in is said to be modeled after *The Bon Marche*. The narrative details many of *Le Bon Marche's* innovations, including its mail-order business, its system of commissions, its in-house staff commissary, and its methods of receiving and retailing goods. The book is a sequel to another novel by Zola, *Pot-Bouille* or *Pot-Luck*. The book, other than focusing on Denise, it also features a returning character from the previous novel, Octave Mouret, who had married Caroline Hedouin, the owner of a small silk shop. Sadly, at the start of *Paradise*, Octave has now become a widower as his new wife had died. Octave has expanded her business into a retail chain and is beginning to possess the entire city block. There is a social message in the book: Octave's grand store (called, of course, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, aka *Ladies' Happiness*, or *Paradise*) is beginning to encompass all business previously

seen by the smaller stores, much like Denise's uncle (who owns a small clothing store himself).

However, near the end of the book you begin to feel a sense of accomplishment for Octave and his ideas. You eventually begin to realize that the massive and powerful juggernaut that is Paradise was built on true hard work and intelligent social innovation and adaptation, and as such, you start to sympathise more with Octave than the small merchants. The story is actually a simple one. A basic love story between Octave and Denise that ends happily-ever-after. However, what the novel does underneath the basic plot is what it truly exceeds and shines at. It gives detailed and beautiful descriptions of the store, the sales, the merchandize, the laces, and the dresses.

The story revolves around the store itself; the characters are seen in it often and are built up around their actions in it (they buy, sell, and even steal). In *Pot-Luck*, Octave is depicted as a ladies' man who seduces or attempts to seduce women who can give him something of material value. This characteristic is continued in *Paradise*. Here, he uses a young widow to influence a political figure in order to have frontage access to a huge place of business for the store. Despite his contempt for women, Octave finds himself slowly falling in love with Denise, whose inability to be seduced by his charms further inflames him. The book ends with Denise admitting her love for Octave. Her marriage with Octave is seen as a victory of women over a man who refuses to be conquered. Zola's novels are a uniform of high quality.

His writing is superb and eloquent and his ability to weave a story around the aspects of daily Parisian life makes his novels a wonderful time capsule of information on that era. We can see characters who seemingly jump off the page to life and are greeted with what we can hope are actual representations of their real life counterparts, the Parisians who would have shopped in stores such as Paradise, or as more importantly, Bon Marche. The Ladies' Paradise is an excellent read and paints a fascinating picture of life in the emerging Paris department stores of the late 19th century. It is therefore no wonder Zola's work and Miller's work are so closely tied together.

Using a primary source will always garner you facts and information that give detail inside the lives and times of our ancestors. However, historical fact can only account for so much; it gives us a detailed look much like a picture allows us to view an event. We see the images displayed, we can read captions about them and understand the subject and what was happening, but we don't actually feel the situation. A picture, like a historical record, can only display one type of media; the picture can't play the sounds that accompanied the event or the smell of the air as someone briskly walked along the scenery of what's in the photograph.

In those terms, fiction can actually fill in the gaps. Fiction and literature of all kinds (magazines, newspapers, etc) should be seen as vignettes into the past. In an era where moving pictures, or even pictures in general, were either scarce or nonexistent, fiction and literature can be what was the pulse on that period in time. It provides emotional context for the scene and gives you a story that would have been read during the time of its publication.

One can connect with a group of people who have died long before one was even born. With it all being said, Miller's piece must have used Zola's work in numerous occasions in order to properly give the examples needed. Miller's work is a documentation, but its definitely narrative history. Using Zola as a source would give him a better understanding of the employees during the time of the store's grandiose ventures pre and post WWI; It would allow him to give better descriptions of those who were actually there during the events. Using the character of Octave, he can better understand the ideologies and mindsets of Aristide and Marguerite Boucicaut.

Historians can use these writings as a beacon of what was once there and now is gone. When a historian can no longer visit an area of historical importance, when a historian can no longer talk to someone who's been apart of the events, historical fiction can better allow them to understand the nature of the times. The story of the Bon Marche is a fascinating one, and Zola's work actually allows one to fully immerse oneself into the world that was 19th century Paris. Historical fiction (or, that is, historical fiction that only takes small liberties with the time period) should be used for future generations.

Eventually, times and people will have changed that you can no longer obtain a primary source, let alone understand the humanity behind the history. Historical fiction grants us that, as an emotional record of the past.