Female Recipients of Major French Literary Prizes (1903-2004)
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Since the creation of the Prix Goncourt in 1903, women writers have felt that their books were at a disadvantage in competition for major French literary prizes. The following bibliography reveals that these early impressions were well founded, and that the situation has improved only marginally in recent years. To this day women have received 18% of all the attributions of the five leading French awards (the Prix Goncourt, Femina, Renaudot, Interallié and Médicis). This percentage drops to 12% if we discount the Prix Femina. With the exception of this prize, no women received any other literary award until the 1930s and it was not until 1944 that the Prix Goncourt was first awarded to a woman. In her 2004 critical bibliography on women writers today that appeared in these pages, Martine Guyot-Bender laments the fact that even in the 1990s, “c’est au compte gouttes que les femmes reçoivent des prix littéraires” (p. 13).

When the Prix Vie heureuse (renamed the Prix Femina in 1919) was founded in 1904, one of its stated purposes was to try to redress this inequality. However, perhaps in an effort not to appear biased toward women authors, even this prize has gone to women only 38% of the time. This bibliography will be of interest not only because of the titles and authors that it lists, but also for its value as a statistical record of the number of women who have won French literary awards and of the years they have done so. While there is controversy and recently even an investigation in to the fact that these prizes regularly go to the same publishers, the “Galligrasseuil” consortium to use the expression coined by Pierre Belfond (see Ducas and Hamon), the fact that women authors receive a mere 18% of the prizes has attracted surprisingly little attention.

Prix Goncourt

This prize is generally considered the leading French literary prize today and is awarded annually to a work of fiction published within the year. Although the prize represents a cash value of a paltry 10 euros, its impact on book sales and on the career of an author is considerable¹.

The Prix Goncourt was established by a provision in the will of the colourful nineteenth-century novelist and diarist, Edmond de Goncourt. He had a jury of 10 writers in mind for his prize as early as 1874 though he changed the names on his list many times as he survived or argued with prospective jurists. Between 1874 and his death in 1896, 20 different names had figured on Goncourt’s list and not one of them had ever been that of a woman (Caffier, 14-15). Goncourt was determined that his jury be made up of “men of letters”, not the aristocrats or political figures who typically held seats at the Académie française. His aim was that the Prix Goncourt should differ significantly from the Prix de l’Académie française, both in the clarity of the criteria it used to select its single annual winner and in the composition of the jury. This made the Prix Goncourt, to use the

¹ In the 1980s Hamon and Rotman estimated that a book which received the Prix Goncourt generally sold an average of 300 000 copies, the receipt of a Prix Femina meant sales of approximately 100 000 copies, and winners of the Interallié, Renaudot and Médicis could expect to sell around 50 000 copies (Hamon et Rotman, 168).
terminology of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, an award “granted by the set of producers who produce for other producers, their competitors, i.e., by the autonomous self-sufficient world of ‘art for art’s sake’, meaning art for artists” (Bourdieu, 50-51). In contrast, being honoured by the Académie française offered, according to Bourdieu, “the principle of legitimacy corresponding to “bourgeois” taste and to the consecration bestowed by the dominant fractions of the dominant class” (Bourdieu, 51). When the Prix Goncourt was awarded for the first time in 1903 to the unknown writer John-Antoine Nau, many women writers thought that it ought to have gone to the better known Anna de Noailles. One of the books that was viewed as a serious contender for the second Prix Goncourt in 1904 was a novel entitled La Conquête de Jérusalem by Myriam Harry. Although the book was initially widely praised, when it became known that the author was a woman, jury members like Joris-Karl Huysmans withdrew their support amid a flurry of misogynist comments about both the book and its author. Pierre Descaves, the son of Lucien Descaves, who was a member of the first Goncourt jury, recalled that “Huysmans found that literature was becoming sufficiently feminized without the need to offer a prize to the dear “literary sisters” (Descaves, 159). The 1904 Prix Goncourt thus went to Léon Frapié for his novel, La Maternelle. This prompted the founding of the Prix Vie heureuse, later renamed the Prix Femina, by a group of women authors in order to redress the perceived injustice.

Women have been recipients of the Prix Goncourt 9 times in the 102 attributions of the prize since its founding, representing just short of 9% of all winners. They have averaged one prize per decade since the 1940s with two in each of the 1950s and the 1990s.

1944

1952

1954

1962

1966

1979

1984
Prix Femina

In reaction to the controversy around the first two attributions of the Prix Goncourt, Madame Caroline de Broutelles, the young director of a woman’s journal entitled La Vie heureuse, decided to found another literary prize whose jury would be composed only of women. It is likely because of the humble origins of the prize that it took a while for it to be taken seriously. La Vie heureuse, founded in 1902, was not a literary publication and the prizes that were associated with it up until this point were contests among its readers in typically domestic areas (who could grow the best chrysanthemums, for example (Do, 65)). When the first Prix Vie heureuse was awarded in January 1905 to Myriam Harry, thus redressing the perceived wrong of the attribution of the Goncourt prize for 1904 to Léon Frapié, the founding jury presented its goals as follows:

Les prix de l’Académie sont, de par la volonté de leurs fondateurs, attribués à des œuvres strictement définies. Les Goncourt, en fondant par leur testament un prix simplement attribué, sans qu’il fût posé de candidature, après débats et par le vote, à un homme de lettres, auteur du meilleur roman de l’année, ont créé une autre spécialisation. Dans le seul champ des œuvres d’imagination, les clauses de leur testament éliminent encore les poètes. Et vraisemblablement le prix ne sera jamais attribué à une œuvre de femme. Il appartenait à des femmes de supprimer, avec les autres, cette double restriction. Le prix de cinq mille francs, dit prix Vie heureuse, qui est attribué chaque année par un jury composé de femmes de lettres, est destiné au meilleur ouvrage de l’année, imprimé en langue française, que l’auteur soit un homme ou une femme, qu’il soit écrit en vers ou en prose. (Quoted in Quella-Villeger, 237).

It is significant that the Femina jurors did not attempt to create a parallel canon of works written exclusively by women by awarding the prize to women only. They choose instead to create a competition in which the works of men and women, in poetry and prose, could compete on what they perceived as equal footing. Interesting questions arise, however, as to the extent that the prize assisted in promoting women’s writing. There is some suggestion, for instance, that the Académie Goncourt did not feel it had to look seriously at novels by women because the perception was that they would be rewarded with the Prix Femina (for more on this, see Ajalbert).

However, this award was the only one to go to a woman author before 1930. It has been awarded to women authors 36 times out of a total of 94 attributions\(^2\). This means

\(^2\) I have not counted as works by women the 1944 prize which was attributed collectively to the Éditions de Minuit, and then refused, or the 1921 prize which was given solely to Raymond Escholier though the
that this prize alone has gone to women authors exactly as many times as women have won the four other prizes combined. Its jury, made up of women authors only, has served as an important literary network for women, particularly in the early years of the prize. For these reasons, its contribution to the acceptance and consecration of women’s writing by the literary establishment in France is undeniable.

1904

1906

1907

1910

1913

1923

1927

1928

1933

1935

1936

1937

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The winning book was signed by both Raymond and his wife, Marie Escholier. Unlike the *Prix Goncourt*, the *Prix Femina* was not awarded during the first and second World Wars.

1945

1947

1949
Le Hardouin, Maria. *La Dame de coeur*. Paris : Corrêa.

1951

1952

1953

1958

1960

1966

1967

1968

1976

1980

1981

1982

1983

1989

1990

1991

1992

1996

1999

2001

2002

**Prix Renaudot**

This prize, named after Théophraste Renaudot, founder of the first *Gazette de France* under Louis XIII, was created in 1925 by a group of journalists and literary critics lead by Georges Charensol who were waiting impatiently for the announcement of the winner of the *Prix Goncourt*. The criteria it uses to select its annual winner is thus the same as that for the Goncourt and it is awarded on the same day. It can not be given to an author who has already received a major literary prize. It is meant to reward writing that is innovative in style and to correct perceived errors in the attribution of the *Prix Goncourt*. The winner of this prize is often considered to be the “runner-up” to the Goncourt.

There have been 10 female recipients of the *Prix Renaudot*. Women authors thus make up 12.7% of the 79 *Renaudot* prizes winners since 1926.

1953

1962

1973

1980

1984

1985

1998

2001

2004

**Prix Interallié**

Inspired by the *Prix Renaudot*, this prize was also created by a group of journalists lead by Pierre Humbourg while waiting this time at the Cercle Interallié to hear the name of the 1930 *Prix Femina* winner. The jury for the *Prix Interallié* is made up of 10 journalists, plus the previous year’s laureate. 11% of the winners of this prize have been women.

1932

1963

1967
1968

1976

1980

1984

1992

**Prix Médicis**

The most recently founded of the five major French literary awards, this prize has the second highest percentage of female winners after the *Prix Femina*. Women authors have been the recipients of the *Prix Médicis* nine times in the prize’s 47 attributions, making up 19% of all winners.

The *Prix Médicis* was first awarded in 1958. It was created by Gala Barbisan and Jean-Paul Giraudoux to encourage an author whose renown did not yet match their talent. It rewards new styles and experimental writing and is, for instance, the only one of the major literary prizes to have taken notice of the *nouveau roman* (see Ducas, 71).

Although some see the relationship of this prize to the *Prix Femina* as being equivalent to that between the *Renaudot* and the *Prix Goncourt*, when it was first created members of the Femina jury were at pains to assert the independence of the two prizes. In 1959, Femina jurist and former prize winner Camille Marbo said that « le Médicis n’est pas “notre” Renaudot, comme on l’a dit et écrit un peu partout. C’est… un jury parasitaire qui profite du même cadre que nous et se réunit le même jour afin de bénéficier des journalistes; mais nous n’avons rien de commun. Rien du tout » (Bourdier, 4).

1962

1964

1966

1969
1988

1993

1996

2002
Garréta, Anne F. *Pas un jour*. Paris: Grasset.

2004

**Works Cited**


