

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 jurors. 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

Triolet, Elsa. *Le Premier accroc coûte deux cents francs*. Paris: Gallimard.

1952

Beck, Beatrix. *Léon Morin, prêtre*. Paris: Gallimard.

1954

de Beauvoir, Simone. *Les Mandarins*. Paris: Gallimard.

1962

Langfus, Anna. *Les Bagages de sable*. Paris: Gallimard.

1966

Charles-Roux, Edmonde. *Oublier Palerme*. Paris: Grasset.

1979

Maillet, Antonine. *Pélagie la charette*. Montréal : Leméac. Paris: Grasset.

1984

Duras, Marguerite. *L’Amant*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

1996

Roze, Pascale. *Le Chasseur zéro*. Paris: Albin Michel.

1998

Constant, Paule. *Confidence pour confidence*. Paris: Gallimard.

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 attributions². 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

Harry, Myriam. *La Conquête de Jérusalem*. Paris : Fayard.

1906

Corthis, André (pseud. de Mme Raymond Lecuyer, née Andrée Husson). *Gemmes et moires*. Paris : Flammarion.

1907

Yver, Colette. *Princesses de science*. Paris : Calmann-Lévy.

1910

Audoux, Marguerite. *Marie-Claire*. Paris : Fasquelle.

1913

Marbo, Camille. *La Statue voilée*. Paris : Fayard.

1923

Galzy, Jeanne. *Les Allongés*. Paris : Rieder.

1927

Le Franc, Marie. *Grand-Louis, l'innocent*. Paris : Rieder.

1928

Dunois, Dominique (pseud. de Marguerite Lemesle). *Georgette Garou*. Paris : Calmann-Lévy.

1933

Fauconnier, Geneviève. *Claude*. Paris : Stock.

1935

Silve, Claude (pseud. de Philomène de Lévis-Mirepoix, comtesse Jules de la Forest-Divonne). *Bénédiction*. Paris : Grasset.

1936

Hervieu, Louise. *Sangs*. Paris : Denoël et Steele.

1937

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.

Vincent, Raymonde. *Campagne*. Paris : Stock.

1945

Monnet, Anne-Marie. *Le Chemin du soleil*. Paris : Editions du Myrte.

1947

Roy, Gabrielle. *Bonheur d'occasion*. Montréal : Beauchemin, Paris : Flammarion.

1949

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

1951

Tourville, Anne de. *Jabadao*. Paris : Stock.

1952

Rolin, Dominique. *Le Souffle*. Paris : Seuil.

1953

Oldenbourg, Zoé. *La Pierre angulaire*. Paris : Gallimard.

1958

Mallet-Joris, Françoise. *L'Empire céleste*. Paris : Juillard.

1960

Belloq, Louise. *La Porte retombée*. Paris : Gallimard.

1966

Monési, Irène. *Nature morte devant la fenêtre*. Paris : Mercure de France.

1967

Etchérelli, Claire. *Élise ou la vraie vie*. Paris : Denoël.

1968

Yourcenar, Marguerite. *L'Oeuvre au noir*. Paris : Gallimard.

1976

Haumont, Marie-Louise. *Le Trajet*. Paris : Gallimard.

1980

François, Jocelyne. *Joue-nous « España »*. Paris : Mercure de France.

1981

Hermaty-Vieille, Catherine. *Le grand vizir de la nuit*. Paris : Gallimard.

1982

Hébert, Anne. *Les Fous de Bassan*. Paris : Seuil.

1983

Delay, Florence. *Riche et légère*. Paris : Gallimard.

1989

Germain, Sylvie. *Jours de colère*. Paris : Gallimard.

1990

Fleutiaux, Pierrette. *Nous sommes éternels*. Paris : Gallimard.

1991

Jacques, Paula. *Deborah et les anges dissipés*. Paris : Mercure de France.

1992

Garat, Anne-Marie. *Aden*. Paris : Seuil.

1996

Brisac, Geneviève. *Week-end de chasse à la mère*. Paris : Editions de l'Olivier.

1999

Desbiolles, Maryline. *Anchise*. Paris : Seuil.

2001

Ndiaye, Marie. *Rosie Carpe*. Paris : Minuit.

2002

Thomas, Chantal. *Les Adieux à la reine*. Paris : Seuil.

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.

1930

Beaumont, Germaine. *Piège*. Paris: Lemerre.

1953

Bertin, Célia. *La dernière innocence*. Paris: Corrèa.

1962

Jacquemard, Simone. *Le Veilleur de nuit*. Paris: Seuil.

1973

Prou, Suzanne. *La Terrasse des Bernardini*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.

1980

Sallenave, Danièle. *Les Portes de Gubbio*. Paris: Seuil.

1984

Ernaux, Annie. *La Place*. Paris: Gallimard.

1985

Billetdoux, Raphaële. *Mes nuits sont plus belles que vos jours*. Paris: Grasset.

1998

Bona, Dominique. *Le Manuscrit de Port Ebène*. Paris: Gallimard.

2001

Le Coz, Martine. *Céleste*. Paris: Editions du Rocher.

2004

Nemirovsky, Irène. *Suite française*. Paris: Denoël.

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

Ratel, Simone. *La Maison des Bories*. Paris: Plon.

1963

Massip, Renée. *La Bête quaternaire*. Paris: Gallimard.

1967

Baby, Yvonne. *Oui, l'espoir*. Paris: Grasset.

1968

de Rivoyre, Christine. *Le petit matin*. Paris: Grasset.

1976

Billetdoux, Raphaële. *Prends garde à la douceur des choses*. Paris: Seuil.

1980

Arnothy, Christine. *Toutes les chances plus une*. Paris: Grasset.

1984

Perrein, Michèle. *Les Cotonniers de Bassalane*. Paris: Grasset.

1992

Bona, Dominique. *Malika*. Paris: Mercure de France.

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

Audry, Colette. *Derrière la baignoire*. Paris: Gallimard.

1964

Wittig, Monique. *L'Opoponax*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

1966

Blais, Marie-Claire. *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*. Montréal : Les Éditions du Jour. Paris: Grasset.

1969

Cixous, Hélène. *Dedans*. Paris: Grasset.

1988

Rocheftort, Christiane. *La Porte du fond*. Paris: Grasset.

1993

Bernheim, Emmanuelle. *Sa femme*. Paris: Gallimard.

1996

Hauptman, Jacqueline. *Orlanda*. Paris: Grasset.

2002

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

2004

Nimier, Marie. *La Reine du silence*. Paris: Gallimard.

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Descaves, Pierre. *Mes Goncourt*. Paris : Calmann-Lévy, 1949.

Do, Tess Phoung-Thao. « Aux prises avec les prix: Les Femmes du Fémina. » Diss. University of Western Ontario, 1998.

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