

at modern theatre history and serves as a provocative model for historical research.

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Visual Habits: Nuns, Feminism, and American Postwar Popular Culture. Rebecca Sullivan. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005; illustrations; xi + 255 pages; ISBN 0-8020-3776-3; \$29.95 (paper).

At least fifteen films featuring nuns were released in America in the 1950s and 60s; a remarkable nine were under production in 1966 alone. How is it that a time known best for its social turbulence and flouting of conventional sexual and religious mores apparently also had a fascination with the lives of celibate, cloistered, and presumably conservative women? Rebecca Sullivan's superb, groundbreaking volume explores this question in detail. Sullivan persuasively argues that nuns provided a site for exploration and negotiation of the tensions arising out of postwar culture's shift of emphasis towards individualism, coupled with a gender regime of mandatory domesticity for women. Nuns offered a "third way" between the sexually liberated "swinging single" and the "domestic goddess," in an ironic admixture of independence (from men) and submission (in the institution). As Sullivan puts it, "nuns were a third option that fired up dreams of feminine independence while smothering any possibility that the flames might spread out of control" (12). Throughout her discussion of how nuns figured in popular culture sites such as film, folk music and television, Sullivan also offers a sustained critique of both feminist analyses that dismiss religion as irrelevant and/or impose an unexamined view of "liberated" sexuality as a self-evident appropriate cultural norm. Her subtle, complex, brilliant and original text sets a new standard for the analysis of "discourses and doctrines of

femininity and how they are applied not just to women but to places, practices and objects" (216). Eminently readable, and highly recommended.

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Literary Sisterhoods: Imagining Women Artists. Deborah Heller. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005; illustrations; xiii + 182 pages; ISBN 0-7735-2909-8; \$27.95 (paper).

In *Literary Sisterhoods: Imagining Women Artists*, Deborah Heller casts her eye over five authors writing across Europe and North America, from the start of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth: Germaine de Staël, George Eliot, Anna Banti, Alice Munro, and Grace Paley. By juxtaposing their fiction, Heller aims to chart a feminist "genealogy of the figure of the woman artist" (3). Combining close readings with biographical and cultural analyses, she explores the affinities and contrasts between her authors, the authors and their fictional artists, and the artist figures and other characters in the texts.

As Heller suggests, these relationships are striking, worthy of critical pursuit. She highlights the dialogues her central authors took up with each other and with authors whose works figure more tacitly in the study. Heller opens the chapter on Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* with Eliot's assessment of Staël as "a woman of great intellectual power" and references to Staël's *Corinne* in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*; she notes Staël's influence on George Sand and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who were in turn "enormously admired" by Eliot (37). Heller effectively turns our attention to the rich and diverse ways her authors develop their characters, and how their characters engage with each other: she considers, for example, Banti's mix of fiction, biography, and history in

Artemisia, and observes Banti's experiments with the boundaries between her narrator and artist. Heller often avoids forcing simple parallels among her subjects, and points to the differing cultural contexts that create distances between modern readers and Staël and Eliot in particular.

Aspects of Heller's critique are questionable, however, and could have been strengthened by a differently balanced approach. Her chapter on Grace Paley fills one third of the book and is about three times the length of the other chapters. Heller argues that because Paley's artist, Faith, appears in many of her short stories, a longer analysis of these texts is in order. She takes an extensive look at Faith's personal perceptions and relationships, her social consciousness and activism - all of which do much to shape her character, but take space from a deeper consideration of Faith as an author. Here, I am left curious about how Faith responds to the other writers and writing subjects in Paley's stories, the "metafictional play" (112) between Paley and Faith, as well as the challenge of reading Faith as an author when her creative identity is so often flexible, elusive. A more concise study of Faith also might have allowed for elaboration on the glimpses Heller offers of the reception histories of her other authors. (Her brief comments on Corinne's readers are especially intriguing.) Occasionally, Heller's statements on her artists' continued relevance are heavy-handed: "these writers and their subjects, in their different ways, can help illuminate our own separate and shared worlds" (13); Eliot's "novel may still engage us, move us, and even make us weep" (35). These comments read as unnecessary because the ideas explored by each author and the critical questions raised by Heller are provocative themselves.

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Pegi by Herself: The Life of Pegi Nichol MacLeod, Canadian Artist. Laura Brandon. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005; 246 pages; ISBN 0-77352-8636; \$39.95 (cloth).

Other than Emily Carr, whose curious lifestyle and own prolific writings saved her from obscurity, most Canadian women artists of the early twentieth century have been all but eclipsed by the Group of Seven narrative that overwhelms this nation's art history. In *Pegi by Herself: The Life of Pegi Nichol MacLeod, Canadian Artist*, Laura Brandon revives the life of a painter, teacher, wife and mother who, despite the challenges she faced, made a significant contribution to the direction of Canadian art. Brandon's account is presented as a chronological unfolding of Nicol MacLeod's life, from her birth in 1904 in small-town southwestern Ontario to her untimely death in New York City at the age of forty-four. She tells the story of a bohemian character who struggled to balance her career with the restrictions of being a woman in early twentieth-century Canada; a thorough picture of Nicol MacLeod is constructed through reference to letters, photographs and autobiographical paintings. While the biography seems to be aimed at a general rather than art history audience, and interpretation of Nichol MacLeod's work is kept to a minimum, Brandon's art historical training is evident in her penetrating analyses of the photographic documents of the artist's life, which is used to make postulations about the artist's character and disposition. The vivid portrait that results is an intriguing read; it conveys an engaging picture of Nicol MacLeod's struggles for success at a time when artistic triumphs did not come easily to women.

Brandon's depiction is one of an artist who was forward-thinking, who worked within an aesthetic that many laypeople found unconventional, and who therefore faced doubts about her own work over the course of her career. The author offers a detailed image