Mosher on Birkett and Rivers, eds. (2009)


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In this collective volume, twenty-four contributors provide insight into the multitude of pedagogical methods and scholarly frameworks available to professors who wish to teach Claire de Duras's novel, Ourika, in the undergraduate classroom. This book is part of a series entitled, Approaches to Teaching World Literature, edited by Joseph Gibaldi. A general survey of instructors serves as the starting point for each volume in the series.

As the preface states, the goal of the entire series is to bring together a wide variety of viewpoints and methods for teaching a particular literary work, tradition or writer. Given the seamless organization, the diversity of topics addressed in the work's twenty-two separate essays and the thoughtful introduction written by the editors, this volume's analysis of Duras's Ourika achieves the objective of the larger series.

First published anonymously in 1823, the novel presents Ourika, its main character and the first known black female narrator in the history of French literature. Born in Senegal in the second half of the eighteen century, the literary figure named "Ourika" was purchased in front of a slave ship in Senegal by le Chevalier de B. Upon his return to Paris, the toddler is given to le Chevalier's aristocratic aunt as a gift. While the novel is labeled as a work of historical fiction, it is commonly believed that Duras's text was inspired by the writer's first-hand knowledge of the "real-life" Ourika.

Although the eponymous Ourika escapes a life of slavery in exchange for the privileged world of the aristocratic salons of Paris, the narrative is defined by the themes of alterité, identity, race, loneliness and social marginalization. Many of the survey respondents expressed that their students could easily relate to Ourika's sentiments of isolation, difference and otherness, and that these seemingly universal themes often served as points of departure for meaningful class discussions and writing assignments. As the contributors have pointed out, the novel's forty-five pages prove to be an excellent reading length for students as they make what is often a challenging transition from lower- to upper-division French courses.

Despite the brevity of Duras's novel, the chapters of this collaborative volume highlight the richness of this female-authored literary work of nineteenth-century France. In Part I, readers are provided with constructive information about the novel's numerous French and English translations as well as media resources and a detailed historical timeline, entitled "Significant Events in Duras's Life, the Slave Trade, and French History." The four sections of Part II--"Historical Dimensions," "Race, Class and Gender Matters," "Literary Contexts" and "Across the Curriculum"--provide teachers and scholars with a plethora of pedagogical tools, exercise and approaches to Duras's novel both within and beyond the (French) undergraduate curriculum.

As a professor of French who has taught Ourika in upper-division French courses countless times, I find that this volume has greatly enhanced my own teaching as well as the scholarly lens through which I read this novel. I highly recommend Approaches to Teaching Duras's Ourika to professors of French and Francophone Studies, specialists in the field of nineteenth-century French literature and to non-specialists who wish to incorporate the English version of Ourika into history and world literature courses. In addition, the collection of essays will be equally beneficial to scholars and graduate students whose research focuses on the French and Haitian Revolutions, the French colonial empire, the African Diaspora, Black Studies or the slave trade.

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