

Sagan & Co: Rediscovering the Literary Geographies of Forgotten Woman Writers

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At the age of 18, French writer Françoise Sagan published her first novel *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954), a novel that fascinated French and international readers alike. Though she grew up in the south of France, Sagan's formative education took place in Paris, the city that saw in the '20s and '30s an astounding prominence of intellectual communities and, ultimately, vast amounts of literary production. By Sagan's teens, this vibrant wave of intellectual migration and writerly creation had well established the city's reputation as the birthplace of contemporary intellectualism – the beating heart, for many, of writing in the west. Yet, as Sagan reached maturity studying at the Sorbonne, the reputation of Paris as the beating heart of contemporary creativity was waning in the face of the social changes wrought by the Second World War and a broader disillusionment with the realities of Parisian life. Writers left the city, and with them they took the ideas they had fostered there. *Bonjour Tristesse*, set in the simmering heat of the south of France, demonstrates this turning of the tides, as Sagan herself left the city and its chaotic intellectual circles to write her novel. Embodying the shifting tides of literary culture within France and abroad, Sagan's work exemplifies the potential for a new literary imagination nourished by the smoldering ashes of a once vivid era.

Despite the positive reception of *Bonjour Tristesse* at the time of its publication, it has since faded from the canonical eye. Our own contemporary lack of understanding of Sagan's work makes her demonstrative of a dynamic unique to the long legacy of woman writers moving through Paris – that of erasure. Sylvia Beach, Adrienne Monnier, Anaïs Nin, Zelda Fitzgerald – French and American authors who all left traces of active participation in the café discussions and bookstore nightcaps of literary Paris – have, like Sagan, largely become figures whose contributions and works have become mere footnotes to our understanding of the literature produced in Paris during this period. How can we understand the impact of mid-century Paris on the development of modern literature as a whole if important contributors much like Sagan have been left out from our calculus?

In order to begin to approach this larger goal over the summer, I explored three main questions: 1) What is the significance and depiction of Paris in the works of these forgotten female writers, both French and American alike? 2) How then can Sagan's work, by departing from the literary geography of Paris for the newer setting of the south, be understood in the context of the women writing before her? 3) How can a combined study of forgotten women writers' treatment of Paris as a literary geography and of Sagan's own literary geographies provide broader insights about literature written in and stemming from Paris, the way it impacted and developed the course of twentieth-century modern literature in the western canon? A summer spent exploring these questions has allowed me to propose and prepare for a senior honors thesis that I will carry out over the course of this academic year as I finish my time at Bowdoin.

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