

**Book Review: French Magazines Encouraged Women to Lean In—  
100 Years Ago**

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**Having It All in the Belle Epoque: How French Women's Magazines  
Invented the Modern Woman.** Rachel Mesch. Stanford University Press, 2013. 256  
pp. hardcover.

Books and babies. Femininity and feminism. Good looks and great minds. These concepts were easily integrated on the pages of two early 20th-century French women's magazines, *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse*, argues Rachel Mesch in her recently published book *Having It All in the Belle Epoque*. Long before American psychologist Sandra Bem began to tout the benefits of the androgynous mindset in the 1970s, and long before Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg encouraged women to embrace their careers without forgoing motherhood, French female intellectuals were doing all this in the narratives constructed on the pages of two women's glossies.

The Belle Epoque, corresponding roughly to the Gilded Age in the U.S., was a period of peace and economic growth, and, in the case of France, flourishing of literature and the arts before World War I. While American women at the time were protesting alcohol as immoral and planting the first seeds of suffrage, French women were engaging in intellectual pursuits and clamoring for seats in the French academy (physicist Marie Curie came close to being elected in 1910). *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* carefully avoided political activism. But Mesch argues that both magazines promoted a strong feminist agenda by portraying women intellectuals, and especially women writers, as accomplished professionals, who continued to perform idealized femininity as wives and mothers.

The goal, Mesch writes, was to pave the road for the recognition of women's accomplishments by alleviating the public fear that success would encourage them to become neglectful mothers or unfeminine wives. Even George Sand, who wrote under a male pseudonym in the 19th century and scandalized many by her masculine dress, was rehabilitated on the pages of *Femina* in 1901 in a story that celebrated her abilities as a hostess and a mother. The point was to show "how to be feminist without using that term"—a story familiar from the contemporary voices of many women's studies students and other de facto feminists, such as Yahoo's executive Marissa Mayer, who refuse to identify themselves as such.

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In a sense, Mesch suggests, *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* served as a sort of “Cinderella powder,” encouraging French female readers to imagine their own potential. Writing was seen as both a “great equalizer” and a “lofty aspiration” for women. Conversations we see as exclusively contemporary, such as how to synchronize a demanding career with family life, were already dissected on the pages of these early women’s publications. The verdict was in: It was possible!

The magazines “offered women readers iconographic evidence of a brand-new role model to emulate: a woman who could balance—with impeccable agility—tradition and innovation, femininity and feminism, work and family,” writes Mesch. All this was happening three decades before French women achieved suffrage in 1944 and seven decades before the French Academy began to elect female members. A popular writer, Madame Delarue-Mardrus, encouraged female readers through the pages of *La Vie Heureuse* to consider dressing in pants as early as 1905—even though Paris did not remove its ban on women wearing trousers (deemed “cross-dressing” in the original 1800 ruling) until 2013.

In spite of their forward thinking, *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* were much like other magazines—deeply invested in conspicuous consumption. Women writers were pictured at their desks, dressed expensively, surrounded by draped laces and all the various materialistic trappings of aristocratic or upper-middle-class life. This linking of art and intellect with high-end goods undoubtedly helped sell the various products, such as corsets and jewelry, advertised in the magazines. Mesch suggests that the publications’ advertising tactics were quite innovative because they implied the products’ benefits rather than simply describing the products, long before this shift in advertising strategy occurred in the 1920s. Further, promotion tactics such as awarding prizes to subscribers and contest winners served a democratizing function by emphasizing that anyone from the diverse readership could become like the stars portrayed in pictures and text.

Although the narratives in *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* represented nothing more than an early “fantasy of female success,” Mesch argues that the creativity and visual innovation of the two publications are worth remembering. The book’s unique angle of analysis, wealth of quotations from primary sources, and many illustrations make it both a viable teaching tool and a scholarly resource.