



75 Years Ago in These Pages

IN THE WINTER 1947 issue, William H. F. Lamont, a professor of English at Rutgers University, proposed a list of “The Hundred Best Novels” followed by (?) and accompanied by a statement of the criteria by which he made his choices: “After much argument pro and con, I decided upon the following: 75 per cent for foreign fiction, 35 per cent for contemporary fiction, and 35 per cent for small-country fiction. All three of these percentages were admittedly arbitrary, but I could think of no better way of achieving a list that was not lopsidedly American-British, or academically antique, or excessively big-country” (*Books Abroad* 21, no. 1, 21–26).

The result was a rather odd Venn diagram of one man’s (and his coterie’s) midcentury literary tastes. Thirty of the choices were British, British Commonwealth, or American, a still rather lopsided proportion, it seems to me, followed by fifteen French novels, thirteen from Russia, and the other forty-two exclusively from Europe and Latin America. All of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East? Not on the map, apparently.

Even more conspicuously, only eight female novelists made the list: the already-canonized nineteenth-century British novelists Austen, the two better-known Brontë sisters, and George Eliot, plus then-recent Nobel laureates Selma Lagerlöf (Sweden), Grazia Deledda (Italy), and Sigrid Undset (Norway/Denmark) as well as Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist Ellen Glasgow. Virginia Woolf or Willa Cather? Not admitted, either.

In the Summer 1947 issue, eight American literary critics—all men—weighed in with their reactions to Lamont’s list. The noted critic H. L. Mencken quipped, “It seems to me that all such lists are hollow and vain. . . . Altogether, I find myself convinced that such efforts are a waste of time, and that professors who prepare them would be better occupied teaching their students how to use reference books or eat soup without gurgling.”

In recent years, *WLT* published a “Top 40” list in 2001 on the occasion of our seventy-fifth anniversary, and the results of a “21 Books for the 21st Century” readers’ poll in the Summer 2021 issue.

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