Career Stories
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Published by Penn State University Press

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Career Stories: Belle Époque Novels of Professional Development.
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This book will contribute a new facet to literary histories of the Belle Epoque, one that has not been explored previously: the fascinating subgenre of the bildungsroman that flourished briefly during the first decade of the twentieth century in France, and that I have labeled the female berufsroman, or novel of women’s professional development. I am using terms borrowed from the German, rather than the general French term roman d’apprentissage because the German term bildungsroman already has several relevant variants that do not exist in French (erziehungsroman, or novel of educational development, and Künstlerroman, or novel of artistic development). Following that pattern, I derived the term berufsroman from the German word for career or avocation, beruf.¹

Such a study will expand our definitions of what “Belle Epoque literature” means beyond the divisive schools of thought that currently exist. In recent years, the breach between studies of the pessimistic and decadent fin-de-siècle era and the optimistic and progressive Belle Epoque has grown wider than ever. For the field of literary history in particular, the production of books examining the fin-de-siècle period has tended to eclipse those that emphasize the Belle Epoque. Such scholars as Gordon Millan, Brian Rigby, and Jill Forbes claim that this divide is based in part on national intellectual trends: “whereas Anglo-American scholars may be happy to think of the period 1870–1914 in France as having been one of fragmentation, repression, and decadence, many French scholars and intellectuals refuse to take up such an unmitigatedly pessimistic and negative position” (Millan, Rigby and Forbes 37–38). French scholars, according to these writers, lean toward a more positive assessment of the turn-of-the-century period and its legacy in contemporary France. Recently, certain Anglo-American scholars have

¹. Although Marion Heister coined a similar term (Angestellerroman) in her 1989 study of German novels, Winzige Katastrophen, the emphasis in that expression is on the employee or staff person (Angestelle is the German word for employee). The texts studied here, however, do not focus on office workers or employees but instead on professional women and their career aspirations and goals.
crossed the divide and have focused on Belle Epoque optimism, rather than fin-de-siècle decadents. These would include Jennifer Waelti-Walters’s influential study, *Feminist Novelists of the Belle Epoque: Love as a Lifestyle* (1990).² My own position in this debate lies mainly with the “optimists” as well. This book on early twentieth-century novels of professional development assumes the idealistic and positive interpretation of the time period, with an emphasis on realist fiction and a focus on bourgeois and working-class heroines, rather than the elite echelons portrayed in works by authors of the Decadent (or fin-de-siècle) movement.

Although much can be learned from literary studies of the Decadents and the women authors associated with that group, such as Rachilde, Renée Vivien, and Natalie Barney, these works do not represent a complete picture of women writers from that time period. In fact, by concentrating mainly on the psychoanalytic, sexual, and moral tensions of women writers’ works, our understanding of the Belle Epoque and of French feminist literary history is undermined. An investigation of novels written about professional women and the particular dilemmas that they faced during the early twentieth century will provide an original addition to existing literary studies of the time period and will supply a bridge between early twentieth-century women’s literature and women’s literature in contemporary France.

The Belle Epoque, as its name indicates, has been remembered as a period of happiness and prosperity in French history. After the tragedy and destruction of World War I, the French looked back upon the era 1900 to 1914 as a time of high hopes for the future and for the new century. Optimism for the growth of France and the dynamism of Europe was widespread, and the new age of technological advances inspired everyone with dreams of easier and healthier lives. New modes of transportation (bicycles, automobiles, and airplanes), electric lights, modern plumbing, and other inventions became

² Waelti-Walters’s groundbreaking study provides a generally sympathetic survey of many different women writers and has served as a springboard for many new examinations of this period of forgotten literature. Since her book appeared in 1990, four more full-length texts have appeared on one or more of these women writers: Milligan’s 1996 *The Forgotten Generation* (on women writers of the interwar period, many of whom began their careers during the Belle Epoque), Goldberg’s 1999 *Woman Your Hour Is Sounding* (on women writers during World War I, 1914–19), Collado’s 2003 *Colette, Delanne-Mardrus, Tinayre*, and Klijn’s 2004 *Une Littérature de circonstance* (on Marcelle Tinayre’s early works). Diana Holmes also devoted an entire chapter of her survey of women’s writing to three Belle Epoque women writers (*French Women’s Writing*, 1996) and she co-edited with Carrie Tarr a collection of essays on women’s history, politics, literature, and arts of the Belle Epoque in 2006 (*A Belle Epoque*?).
the symbolic beacons for a society of progress, mobility, and cleanliness. In the opening pages of his 1910 sociological study of Parisian women, Uzanne comments on the new era’s rapid changes and the benefits provided by new technologies, labeling it a period of transformisme: “We cannot help but affirm that our century is interesting to interpret and define with the accentuated movement of its transformism. This world of beings . . . is infinitely more complicated, more difficult, and as a result, more exciting to represent in successive portraits than the world of our peaceful and simplistic ancestors of 1840. Uzanne’s feelings about the complicated and fascinating new era that he was witnessing, with its changes in politics and the sciences, were common among the Belle Epoque population. Although difficulties would inevitably arise, the general sentiment about change and progress was positive.

The popular Exposition Universelle of 1900, held in Paris, attracted more than fifty million visitors who came from all over the world to view the exhibits and to witness the physical proof of a new, modern era. The main attractions included the Palais de l’Electricité, illuminated by five thousand colored lights at night, the electric-powered triple-decker moving sidewalk, and hundreds of displays of new technology. The design of the pavilions and the exhibits all contributed to the general sentiment that “the forces of nature are subdued and tamed; steam and electricity have become our obedient servant. . . . Science serves us ever more diligently and is conquering ignorance and poverty.”

In the arts, France attained great recognition during this period as a center for innovative ideas and experimental forms. The movement from representational to nonrepresentational art had begun at the end of the nineteenth century with the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists and continued to grow through the developing philosophy and works of the

3. See Eugen Weber’s *France: Fin de Siècle* (1986) for a thorough and entertaining historical account of these modern inventions and the ways in which they changed the everyday life of the French.

4. “On ne saurait affirmer que notre siècle ne soit intéressant à interpréter et à fixer avec le mouvement accentué de son transformisme. Cette société qui disparaît et se renouvelle est transfigurée par de curieux symptômes d’orientation imprévue. Ce monde d’êtres à la veille de subir les métamorphoses que la politique générale, le socialisme, et plus encore la science extraordinairement outillée lui préparent, estfiniment plus compliqué, plus difficile et, par conséquent, plus passionnant à représenter en de successifs portraits que ne fut celui de nos paisibles et simplistes ancêtres de 1840” (Uzanne 5–6).

Fauvists and Cubists at the beginning of the twentieth century. Satie, Ravel, and Debussy reached the pinnacle of their successes during the Belle Époque, as they continued to compose new and controversial musical pieces for an increasing number of admirers and music critics. Writers of all genres experimented with form and content, producing such important and diverse talents as Gide, Proust, Apollinaire, Valéry, and Péguy, to name only a few. These Belle Époque artists, musicians, and writers found new techniques to present their ideas and provided French culture with a feeling parallel to that of the sciences: progress and hope for the new century.⁶

Accompanying these feelings of optimism and forward-looking thought, certain groups in French society also began to reevaluate the position of women. Historians’ accounts of the end of the nineteenth century reveal that support grew rapidly in France for women’s pay equity, equal education, and equal job opportunities, among other goals for women’s rights during this time. Claire Moses, for instance, claims, “By the [nineteenth] century’s end, feminists had a clear sense of direction” (Moses 226).⁷ Some of the major legal victories for women’s rights included, since 1884, the right to divorce and, in 1907, the right to control their earnings. The French women’s suffrage movement also had one of its strongest and most public periods of renewal specifically at the turn of the century. After almost fifteen years of neglect, French suffragist Hubertine Auclert decided to revive her Suffrage des Femmes organization in 1900, due to the increase in men and women receptive to her ideas. Auclert biographer Stephen Hause notes: “The feminist movement that assembled in 1900 was larger and more diverse than the movement of 1885, there were now seven important feminist organizations in France. . . . The combined membership had also doubled. . . . And the growth of the movement was just beginning” (Hause 165).⁸ Even though women would have to wait almost forty-five years to receive the right to vote in France, the Belle Époque period was a turning point in women’s suffrage history because of the growing acknowledgment and support of the idea. Feminist organizations of the beginning of the twentieth century thus enjoyed the same optimism and growth found in the economic, technological, and artistic domains of French culture.
When we shift our attention from the political to the cultural domain in early twentieth-century French studies, however, the most frequently found images of French women are quite different. Popular stereotypes of the French woman usually include visions of decorative “dames,” dressed in boa feathers and enormous hats, strolling in the Bois de Boulogne or lounging at the Moulin Rouge. Some critics have commented on these stereotypical images: “Myth has replaced history to such a degree that these words [la Belle Époque] immediately conjure up a music-hall scene: showgirls in black stockings, pink velvet bodices and feathered hats, dancing the cancan” (Jullian 83). It is true that in many canonical literary works of the time, some of the most famous portrayals of female protagonists are those that depict the lives of demimondaines, dancers, maids, or prostitutes. Many writers of the turn-of-the-century era chose to set their novels and their female characters in the decadent atmosphere of bohemian Paris and what is known popularly as “Paris-by-Night.” Literary critics of the past two decades have begun to break new paths in the field of fin-de-siècle studies, making excellent additions to the traditional literary analyses of the decadent or perverse qualities of female fictional characters from this era.

Recent studies by historians have also contributed greatly to new views of the fin de siècle. Mary Louise Roberts’s 2002 *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France*, with its emphasis on major female culture producers, such as the journalists Gyp and Séverine and the magazine editor Marguerite Durand, has demonstrated innovative ways to interpret the subversively feminist activities of women in the arts during the fin-de-siècle period in France.

9. By focusing on mondaines, demimondaines, and lesbian couples from the Belle Époque, Jullian generally serves to reinforce those “mythical” images, rather than providing alternative portraits of women who were not involved in decadent or opulent lifestyles.

10. Examples include Octave Mirbeau’s *Le Journal d’une femme de chambre* (1900) or Charles-Louis Philippe’s *Babu de Montparnasse*.


12. The following recent works have been influential in forming my own analysis of the Belle Époque heroine: Emily Apter’s *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (1991), Elaine Showalter’s *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (1990), and Eugen Weber’s *France: Fin de Siècle* (1986).
There still exists, however, an unexamined discrepancy between the generalizations made about the perverse or titillating charms of fictional women characters in literature and the activist nature of Belle Époque feminists engaged in political and social domains. Reasons for this gap are complex, but we can point to two main issues. First, we must acknowledge that women writers have generally held a very weak position in literary histories published in France, both one hundred years ago and today. Nancy Sloan Goldberg, referring to forgotten women writers from the Great War of 1914–18, states that literary historians today have continued “the conventional practice of segregating at the end of their books a short chapter discussing the works of a few disparate women authors, massed together under the rubric littérature féminine” (Goldberg xvi). Even when a literary history focuses specifically on women writers, the author sometimes includes a final chapter or epilogue that undermines the innovative qualities of the women studied. In *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France* (1929), Jean Larnac begins with a traditional chronological survey of women writers from the medieval period to the beginning of the twentieth century, then follows with a second section titled “Les Femmes et la littérature” (Women and Literature), including chapters titled “Les Limites du génie féminin” (The Limits of Feminine Creativity), “L’Intelligence féminine” (Feminine Intelligence), and “Le Drame du génie féminin” (The Drama of Feminine Creativity). This second part is devoted to a substantial thesis on the limits of women’s creativity and of the female intellect. Larnac thus undermines the most basic purpose of a literary history here: he says that women writers have inferior abilities and can never be great authors. He lapses into banal generalizations about male intellect and female emotion; about women’s incapacity to write about anything but themselves; about their inability to write comedy, critical analysis, or history. It is perhaps not surprising that a literary history that concludes in this manner would not inspire many future critics or readers to remember the women authors studied.  

13. As Collado has shown, a number of male literary historians engaged in this model of literary history when concerned with women writers (Collado 45). I find distinct connections between Larnac’s unusual history of women writers and a more recent text, Mona Ozouf’s 1995 *Les Mots des femmes*. Ozouf’s literary history also concluded with a long essay on “la singularité française” (French singularity), a controversial statement about the limits of French feminism, which, according to certain critics, undermined rather than reinforced the lives and words of the women she had just studied. Such aberrations from the traditional literary history serve as a direct confirmation of Carolyn Heilbrun’s claim that writing about a woman’s life is often an experimental act. She speaks of women’s biography in the following way: “I have read many moving lives of women, but they are painful, the price is high, the anxiety is intense, because there is no script to follow, no story
While in France the tendency is to dismiss or forget women writers, Anglo-American feminist scholars have published more extensively on French women authors, including forgotten or relatively unknown writers. The emphasis of these scholars, however, has been on fin-de-siècle writers whose female protagonists are generally associated with the Decadent movement in French literature, thus once again ignoring or dismissing the works of feminist writers of the Belle Epoque. Mélanie Collado mentions, for example, that for Rachilde, one of the most famous women authors of the Decadent movement, there are more than fifty articles listed in the MLA database in addition to three new books about her work and life that were published in the ten-year period from 1991 to 2001 (Collado 21). Colette has also enjoyed a great deal of critical attention in the past thirty to forty years; Collado claims that more than 250 articles related to Colette appear in the MLA database, and we have seen more than a dozen full-length books on Colette’s life and work in a similar time frame (1991–2002). In contrast, when I checked the database for the two other Belle Epoque writers in Collado’s study, I found only eight entries total for Marcelle Tinayre and six for Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, including Collado’s work on these writers.

To bridge the gap that separates literary and historical portrayals of women from the Belle Epoque in France, I am suggesting here that the novel of women’s professional development, or female berufsroman, can provide a “missing link” of sorts, to reconnect the now separate domains of literary, social, and political history for French women during the Belle Epoque.

The novels I have chosen to examine all focus on an aspect of life for French women that no literary study of the Belle Epoque, recent or past, has yet recognized or considered in detail: their professional lives in the public sphere of work. Two surveys of Belle Epoque literature have influenced my choice of texts here: Diana Holmes’s contribution to the field in chapter 3 of her 1996 book French Women’s Writing, 1848–1994, and the full-length book by Jennifer Waelti-Walters cited above, Feminist Novelists of the Belle Epoque: Love as a Lifestyle (1990). Holmes in her chapter discusses three novels of women’s professional development, and yet the emphasis of her discussion lies not in their careers, but, as indicated by her chapter title, in “Feminism, Romance, and the Popular Novel.” In her survey, Waelti-Walters examines the works of thirty different

portraying how one is to act, let alone any alternative stories” (Heilbrun 39). When we turn to literary histories about French women authors, we sense that same experimentation: no script, no set story exists for them either.
women authors, discusses more than one hundred books, and covers a wide variety of topics, including family, marriage, love, and education. Only one of her ten chapters addresses the heroines’ professional lives or their actions in the public sphere. Similar to Holmes, much of Waelti-Walters’s work explores themes related to love and marriage, which, while important to the texts that she has chosen, do not provide the alternative viewpoint that I will bring to Belle Epoque literary studies or French feminist literary history. My goal in this book is to discuss the educational, professional, and social aspirations of working-class and bourgeois female characters in these Belle Epoque novels. Because they parallel activities in the political domain, these novels mark a major departure from stereotypical portraits of women from the beginning of the twentieth century that range from the decadent, hysterical, or perverse sexual being to that of the nurturing and self-sacrificing romantic wife and mother. The French women who wrote these novels of professional development gave their fictional heroines increasingly independent roles, careers, and personalities. From the adventures of a provincial public high school student to the trials of an urban medical professional, the female protagonists portrayed in the novels boldly pursued happiness in the public domain. In the following chapters, I will examine eleven of these novels in detail for their innovative character types and the narrative structures that the authors employed to create such new women protagonists. Four of the works focus on women students and teachers: Claudine à l’école (1900, Claudine at School) by Colette; Sévriennes (1900, Women of Sèvres) by Gabrielle Reval; Institutrice (1902, Woman Schoolteacher) by Esther de Suze; and L’Un vers l’autre (1903, One Toward the Other) by Louise-Marie Compain. Four texts focus on women in the sciences: Les Cervelines (1903, The Brainy Women) and Princesses de Science (1907, translated as The Doctor Wife or Princesses of Science) both by Colette Yver; Pharmacienne (1907, Woman Pharmacist) by Marcelle Babin; and La Bachelière (1910, The Female Graduate) by Gabrielle Reval. Three focus on women writers: La Rebelle (1905, The Woman Rebel) by Marcelle Tinayre; La Vagabonde (1910, The Vagabond) by Colette, and Les Cervelines (1903) by Colette Yver. Finally, Les Dames du Palais (1909, Ladies of the Court), by Colette Yver, focuses on women lawyers.  

14. All of the authors listed here have short biographical sketches in Appendix 1. All of the novels have short plot summaries in Appendix 2.
This selection of novels is important for several reasons. First, the narrators of these novels all struggle with the same major question: what did happiness in the public sphere actually mean for women during the Belle Epoque? What did it signify for a woman to pursue an education or a career outside the home, and how could she be happy doing so? These were refreshingly new questions for fictional heroines in French literature at the time. In all of these texts, the protagonists are working, thinking women, and although they often struggled with their dual roles in and out of the public sphere, they sought resolutions to them in resourceful ways. While such a category of heroine may appear to be an anomaly in traditional Belle Epoque studies, it reflects both a growing awareness of the position of French women during the turn of the century and the individual efforts being made to change the flat or one-sided portrayals of women that we have inherited from conventional studies of the Belle Epoque. All of these texts have these general traits in common, but each of the novels addresses different aspects of professional growth, career tensions, technical abilities, sexual harassment, and issues for working women in the private domain. Individual authors approach these topics in a variety of ways, and my choice of texts displays the diverse techniques and narrative structures employed.

Finally, I have chosen to study this selection of novels in depth, rather than offer a survey of the many different texts that could and do fall into this category, because the individual literariness of each of these particular texts is also under question here. Dismissed for too long as uninteresting and antifeminist popular literature, these novels in fact often straddle the line between popular fiction and creative literary works in their innovative manipulation of genre. I must disagree with most of my contemporaries who have made great efforts to recuperate these works and to bring them back into the canon, yet who continue to deny their literary qualities. Goldberg, for example, states that “in general, their works duplicated time-honored conventions of the French novel” (xvi). Diana Holmes writes, “The fundamental narrative form employed by all three authors [Yver, Reval, and Tinayre] is the stereotypically feminine form of the romance” (Holmes 1996, 62). Jennifer Milligan concurs with this simplistic view, although she claims that the romance is “re-read” and “revised” after the war. While I certainly agree that the romance narrative does compose a part of some of these writers’ novels, it is neither stereotypical nor conventional in form. Many of these novels of professional development twist the requirements of the romance genre to suit their heroines’ professional needs or they may even jettison the romance elements completely. Rather than “revising”
or “re-reading” the romance, I believe we need to take a new view of
these texts and understand them as an innovative contribution to the Belle
Epoque, one that would pave the way for new types of heroines and plot-
lines in later twentieth-century French literature.

To contextualize the actions and thoughts of such original female pro-
tagons and storylines, both historically and socially, in Chapter 1 I describe
some of the historical changes in the status of women in France that occurred
at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.
These political, social, and cultural improvements for French women opened
the doors for the pioneering attitudes of the female characters in these
Belle Epoque novels. Professional women heroines appear in great num-
bers for the first time in French literature during the Belle Epoque, but the
novel of professional development and its cousin, the bildungsroman, or
coming-of-age novel, had been staples of French literature for years. After
surveying in Chapter 1 the historical position of women during the Belle
Epoque that provides the setting for these novels, I will, in Chapter 2, examine
a number of literary models that existed during the time. The nineteenth
century produced very few professional female characters in French litera-
ture, and none who attended university or professional schools, as in the
Belle Epoque texts that I am studying here. As an example, we do find a
number of women who work in Zola’s texts, but most are unskilled laborers
or those who learn a trade or an assistant’s role through an apprenticeship.
These women include the laundress Gervaise in L’Assommoir (1877), the
mineworkers Catherine and Maheude in Germinal (1885), the store clerk
Denise Baudu in Au Bonheur des dames (1883), the artist who replaces her ill
husband in “Madame Sourdis” (1874), and the niece Clotilde who acts as
secretary for her uncle in Le Docteur Pascal (1893). Zola portrays all of these
women at work, and in the specific case of Au Bonheur des dames, we could
even categorize the plot as a berufsroman since it does follow the develop-
ment of the young heroine and her professional career in the department
store. But the main storylines in the other texts do not center on the women's
careers and their abilities to adapt to or make changes to their professional
domains, therefore they remain outside the definition of a female novel of
professional development. I will return to a discussion of professionals, both
men and women, in late nineteenth-century French literature in Chapter 2.15

15. The existence of women professionals historically appears to be key for the creation of liter-
ary texts with professional heroines. For example, when we look at the contrast in women’s involve-
ment in the medical profession in Europe and the United States, the correlation becomes clear.
Based in part on the bildungsroman, the berufsroman was a unique subgenre during this time period and required a particular style and special features to convey its message. Women authors grounded their female characters in some of the basic molds that male heroes had followed, whether they were teachers and students for the erziehungsroman (novel of educational development), or writers and artists for the Künstlerroman (novel of artistic development). But in order to provide a convincing and appealing fictional account of the femme nouvelle (New Woman), the authors invented new narrative structures and new plot devices. They also made significant alterations to the standard character types so that they would conform to the specific plight facing female protagonists. I offer in Chapter 2 an overview of the traditional components of the genre as it appeared at the end of the nineteenth century, with the purpose of outlining the general literary structures and devices that appeared commonly in this type of text. This survey of the texts of male contemporaries will allow us to see clearly the innovative novel-writing strategies women authors developed as they created their own novels of professional development in turn-of-the-century France.

The emphasis on the literariness of these texts is crucial for this book; when we examine the novels in closer detail, we are able to distinguish efforts by individual authors to create narrative structures and fictional protagonists that altered historical and social perceptions of Belle Epoque women professionals. Many of the female characters fall into one of three general categories: communities of women, female pioneers in male fields, and independent women who do not consult with or rely on either women or men for success. The first group is generally present in novels about education: women teachers or students (or both) elaborate a support system among themselves that will strengthen their morale and encourage them to excel in their student and professional lives. In Chapter 3 I focus on the dynamics of different types of women’s communities and the effects

In the United States, where the first woman doctor—Elizabeth Blackwell—received her degree in 1849, there were numerous women physicians practicing by the end of the century (Elder and Schwarzer 165). Correspondingly, in a three-year period in the early 1880s, we find that three different novels about American women doctors were published in the United States: Dr. Breen’s Practice (1881) by William Dean Howells, Dr. Zay (1882) by Elizabeth Stewart Phelps, and A Country Doctor (1884) by Sarah Orne Jewett (Furst 221). In contrast, Germany, which was the last European country to allow women to practice full medicine, in 1899 (Meyer 1997, 146), did not produce novels about women doctors in the nineteenth century. Paulette Meyer has shown that women of Eastern Europe (Russia, Poland, Germany) who wished to pursue a career in medicine had to attend schools in Zurich or Paris since they were refused at their own country’s medical school (Meyer 1997, 279).
that they have on the main protagonists in four novels about education and women. These novels contain the strongest links to the traditional erziehungsroman, or novel of educational development. The second type, female pioneers in a male field, usually appears in novels about science and technology. Whether they are scientists, researchers, or interns, the protagonists are usually the only women in their professional schools or work environments. They generally do not have female companions with whom they may confer or in whom they might confide. They therefore must learn their system of values and code of professional behavior predominantly from their fathers, their male classmates, or their male professors or supervisors at work, and they do not have the opportunity to consider a women’s community or a women’s system of work. In Chapter 4 I examine four novels about women and science and the contradictions that these “pioneers” must work through in order to pursue a career and balance it with their private lives. In these novels, we find an unusual fusion of two very different genres: the bildungsroman and the romance. Each author intertwines the two genres in inventive ways and the results offer a consuming competition for the reader’s attention. The third type, independent women, usually develops in novels about writers and artists. Those who work as journalists, novelists, and performers often remain closely connected to critics, colleagues, and admirers. But these particular writers and performers do not seek inspiration or support from any of these groups. They set their own priorities and do not feel the need to collaborate with others to pursue their own professional goals. Chapter 5 includes an analysis of three novels whose subject matter contains the portrayal of a woman writer and the gendered definitions of independence and career goals. Because these women are portrayed as mature and self-sufficient, these novels have limited ties to the traditional novel of development, which usually focuses on a young person who is exploring his or her independence for the first time. Instead, the romance narrative comes to the fore in these texts, but it is deeply influenced by the career decisions that the heroine has made. The public identity of the woman becomes most important for her resolution of her personal decisions; such a switch indicates the transitional nature of the Belle Epoque, a time when stereotypes about women’s “instinctive” needs for love and marriage were still firmly planted in bourgeois cultural traditions but loosening their grip on the public’s imagination. Finally, in Chapter 6 I examine a novel about Parisian women lawyers. Because very few women practiced law in France at the time, the novel had little or no basis in actual historical trends. The creative choices that the author made when developing a completely new
type of professional heroine are thus easily explored. Her decision to elaborate all three groups in this novel, the women’s community, the pioneer, and the independent, demonstrates her freedom to produce a variety of fictional models for her readers.

The novels in each of these categories belong to the general division of the berufsroman, or novel of professional development, but because of the varying nature of each work and the narrative compositions of each text, my study of the individual categories will require distinct theoretical approaches for each: sociological theories on professional development, historical theories on the development of science and medicine in Europe, and theories on consumer culture and the production of culture in France, to name a few of the approaches required to study these diverse texts.

A question that naturally arises when we study these women writers and their novels is: what happened to them? Why did they fall into oblivion so completely after World War I? None of the novels studied here has been in print since the 1920s, with the exception of Colette’s texts Claudine à l’école and La Vagabonde. The answers to this question are multiple: canonical exclusion of women writers, decreased interest in the women’s rights movements after the war, or changes in the cultural perceptions of working women. In the concluding chapter I address some of the numerous reasons—historical, cultural, and political—for the rapid disappearance of these works, after World War I, from the shelves of libraries and bookstores around France and include a study of some of the texts that replaced them. Not only will we see why the novel of professional and educational development no longer appealed to the readers, but we will understand what traces of the female novel of professional development were carried into the 1920s, by different authors who created different paths in their plot development. Although most of the Belle Époque novels have remained out of print and unread for the past century, one of the main goals of this book is to demonstrate the role they played and the important place that they hold in French literary history, both as a historical reflection of French women’s culture and an innovative phase in feminist literature from France.