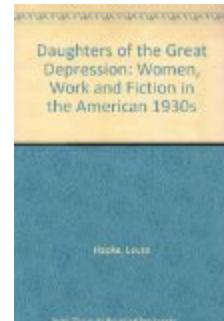


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Laura Hapke. *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995. xxi + 286 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1718-2.

Reviewed by Melissa Walker (Department of History and Politics, Converse College)
Published on H-PCAACA (July, 1996)



Women in the 1930s: Workers or Homemakers?

The first historians of the Great Depression treated the period as if the experiences of white men were the whole story, but in recent years, scholars of social and women's history have begun to explore the experiences of African Americans, Hispanics, women, and even children during this economic cataclysm. Now literary scholar Laura Hapke has enriched our understanding of women's experiences during the Great Depression with *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s*. Examining a wide range of popular fiction produced during the 1930s, Hapke looks at the literary and cultural depictions of homemakers and wage-earning women. She looks at the works of radical and leftist writers as well as generally read fiction. She examines the works of both men and women, of white and African American writers. Hapke, an English professor at Pace University, contends that in the 1930s, more than ever before, fiction became a vehicle for expressing the political and social concerns of the day. She demonstrates how the Depression-era debate about the appropriateness of women's wage-earning, particularly in the face of high male unemployment, played itself out in contemporary fiction.

The most important contribution of Hapke's work is her careful comparison of the depictions of women in fiction with the reality of women's lives. She achieves this end by reading novels alongside the works of historians and government documents of the period. She found wide disparities between the realities of women's lives and the ideal ways in which fictional heroines be-

haved. In spite of the fact that millions of married and single women were wage earners, such workers were often invisible or negatively portrayed in much of the era's fiction. When female wage earners did appear, authors generally focused on their home and family lives, ignoring their struggles and triumphs on the job.

A great deal of 1930s fiction portrayed the ideal woman as a self-sacrificing mother who devoted her efforts to caring for her family without entering the realm of paid work. For example, Hapke points to Ma Joad in John Steinbeck's classic novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Ma Joad is an "earth mother" devoted to holding her family together through hard times with the sheer force of her love rather than her efforts to improve their material conditions by contributing to the family income. Hapke points out that Ma Joad is involved in agricultural labor only once in the course of the novel, and that this situation was depicted as a dire emergency—something unnatural that "good" women would not do under normal circumstances. Hapke notes that Steinbeck's depiction defied the reality: during this period nearly a million women regularly engaged in agricultural work as the wives of tenants and sharecroppers or as agricultural wage laborers (pp. 19-20, 36-38). White male social protest writers like Steinbeck largely rendered working women invisible, instead focusing on heroic mothers like Ma Joad or on failed mothers.

By contrast, African American male writers provided a more balanced and positive picture of working

women, portraying black women and men as the victims of white society. In his autobiographical novel, *Not Without Laughter*, Langston Hughes depicted working women coping with the harsh realities of their work lives as well as their home lives. His women might be exploited in the labor force, but they maintained their dignity.

Similarly, many radical female writers rejected idealized characterizations of women for more balanced and realistic portraits. Still, like white men, they remained reluctant to focus on women's work lives, instead focusing on their struggles within the family. For example, Meridel LeSueur's stories and novels portrayed mothers raising their children alone. They formed their own mutual support networks, earned their own living, and generally succeeded without the help of men. LeSueur's women were not the self-sacrificing earth mothers of Steinbeck and his peers; rather, they were women who did have needs of their own, and we see them struggling with the necessity of subordinating their own needs to those of their children. Hapke notes that radical women like LeSueur, Tillie Olsen, and Agnes Smedley questioned the cultural assumptions about motherhood and challenged the dominant vision of woman as nurturer at home and at work—yet, even then, they still gave little attention to the real struggles of women wage earners on the job.

Hapke also examines portrayals of professional women (who were 15 percent of the female labor force in the 1930s). She notes that female professionals were rarely portrayed in 1930s fiction and, when they were, as in the novels of Sinclair Lewis, they are guilt-ridden at stepping beyond their roles as wives and mothers or thwarted in achieving their ambitions.

One of the richest and most convincing pieces of this work is Hapke's analysis of a group of novels that portrayed the Gastonia, N.C., textile mill strike of 1929. At Gastonia, women were wage earners and as such were central to the strike itself. Yet novelists were ambivalent about portraying them as real workers striking for their own rights. Rather, women employees were depicted as striking in order to earn better lives for their children—again portraying them as idealized earth mothers. Women writers' strike novels (those of Fielding Burke, Grace Lumpkin, Dorothy Myra Page, and Mary Heaton Vorse) explored women's central role in the strike as members of the rank and file. Yet women were rarely strike leaders. Men were strategists, and women were "plucky" protesters. Even those female authors who portrayed legendary militant strike leader Ella Mae Wiggins

revealed their own ambivalence about her leadership role in the ways that they recast and idealize her character.

In spite of their own ambivalence, the female authors nonetheless left women strikers at the center of the story. The male writers' Gastonia novels provide a dramatic contrast. Sherwood Anderson's Gastonia novel, *Beyond Desire*, depicts strikers as united in class solidarity with no gender concerns. Most of the striking women were portrayed as highly emotional single women when, in reality, most of the women workers at Gastonia were married. William Rollins' *The Shadow Before* completely ignores the contributions of women strikers. As Hapke concludes, in Gastonia fiction, as in the strike itself, women are visible but invisible, "Shunted to the margins of the 'main' narrative, the history of a male strike...the heroines of Gastonia share the literary fate of their striking sisters throughout the nation" (p. 177). Just as journalists and union leaders erased the contributions of women strikers, so did fiction writers.

Hapke concludes with an analysis of a work often dismissed as reactionary romantic fiction: Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind*. She notes that the novel was in many ways an allegory set in an earlier era when society's traditions had been shattered and gender roles and expectations turned upside down—just as they were in the Great Depression. But Hapke argues that the novel's meaning is deeper than this: it is an attempt "to meld old and new womanhood." She notes that Scarlett O'Hara's work in the public realm is initially acceptable; women could oversee the plantation while all the men are off to war. Yet Scarlett takes advantage of the upsets in separate spheres ideology created by the war. Hapke concludes that the radical Scarlett is the Scarlett of the last half of the novel, the ambitious woman who weds a man in order to control his lumber business. I found this reading intriguing if not entirely convincing, and Hapke herself concedes that, in the end, Margaret Mitchell gave in to the conventions of her day by branding Scarlett immoral and punishing her for her ambition with community scorn and personal heartbreak.

Hapke concludes that not only general fiction—but also most of the protest literature of the 1930s—treated women as helpmates rather than as actors in their own work lives. As she amply demonstrates, the propriety of women's paid work was debated in every imaginable forum, including the pages of popular fiction. This readable and convincing work contains an impressive historical overview and a class analysis of a wide variety of Depression-era fiction. *Daughters of the Great Depres-*

sion deepens our understanding of how 1930s literature both shaped and reflected cultural images of women. Her work also reminds us that debates about women's roles in the working world persist today; why have the categories of the discussion changed so little after sixty years?

This review is copyrighted (c) 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca>

Citation: Melissa Walker. Review of Hapke, Laura, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. July, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=499>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.