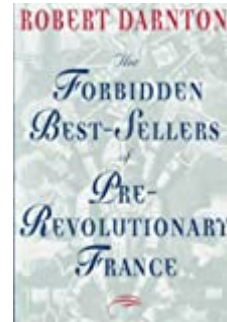


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Robert Darnton.** *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-03720-3.



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Robert Darnton's latest scholarly endeavor is a two volume work, the first volume of which is titled *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*. The second volume is not considered in this review, except in passing.

Darnton sets out to address the question of the role which forbidden literature played in delegitimizing the Old Regime. Before he can do this, he recognizes that he must demonstrate what the French read, for without knowing this, he can not answer "what impact did these books have on attitudes to the Old Regime".

It should be noted that Darnton himself admits that after some two decades of study he wished to write something of substance, answering serious questions. Furthermore, Darnton recognizes "I may be promising more than I can deliver". Rarely a truer self-analysis has been offered.

Darnton has written four books, sewn them under one cover and called them one book. Much analytical history is written these days, and there is certainly a need for synthetic works. This, however, is an example of how not to write one. He insists on drawing the attention of the reader to the number of leaps of faith which are necessary to gain anything substantial from the work. As someone who is naturally skeptical of his methodology,

I find this constant shoulder tapping mere confirmation of my distrust.

What is most disappointing about this volume is that it wanders in navel-contemplative aimlessness for almost one hundred pages, having begun strongly. Darnton observes at the outset that the term "philosophique" referred to whole categories of clandestine literature, as evidenced by the bills of sale and orders from book sellers. This is a valuable insight, from which he might have posed the question "How much impact did each category of "philosophique" work have on the delegitimization of the Old Regime. He might have gone further, to ask how our narrow understanding of "philosophique" has colored our understandings of the French Revolution. Instead, he is content to study only those works which were clearly in the realm of illegal works – furthest beyond the pale then and least accessible now, focussing on three works: *Anecdotes sur Mme l comtesse du Barry, L'an 2440* and *Therese Philosophe*.

Chapter 2, "Best Sellers", constitutes a work within a work, in that it presents large amounts of statistical evidence, the purpose of which is to establish which works are worth studying. The difficulty in connecting this to the rest of the work is in the scope of the study. Scholars from the Annales school have presented case studies for years, but they have recognized the limits of their studies.

Darnton tries to generalize from the available records of one publishing house to a picture of the whole of France. Valuable information though it is, the jump from narrow study to realm-wide significance is too much of a stretch.

Part 2 “Key Texts”, is a careful study of each of three selected texts – but in each case Darnton slips into retelling the story. If he had not appended an anthology (Part 4), this section would have been both more necessary and more useful.

Part 3, “Do Books Cause Revolutions?” is by far the most lucid section of the book. Here, however, the problems of this book become most obvious: Darnton has tried to answer too many questions. Before his approach can be understood, apparently, he needs to explain the differences between two schools of cultural history. Historiography has its place in works of this kind – and this reviewer has read good historiographical summaries in other, similar works. Where others succeed, Darnton has failed. As one comparison, I offer Keith P. Luria’s *Territories of Grace*, in which the historiographic essay forms

Luria’s point of departure, the manner in which he defines the parameters of his work. Coming at the beginning of part 3, Darnton’s chapter simply doesn’t fit where he has put it.

Part 4 is a “short anthology” of the works he has studied in part 2. Had he not so thoroughly investigated them there, this part would give the reader the chance to form his own impressions of Darnton’s conclusions. Instead, this section seems to add bulk rather than substance to the work.

When I was in graduate school one professor insisted that every essay pass the “So What?” test. Darnton’s *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* passes the test: it presents a subject worth studying and attempts to answer the pressing questions “What did they read?” and “How did this effect the delegitimization of the Old Regime?”. Still, Darnton proceeds in such a manner that the reader is no surer of his opinion at the end of the book than he was before plunging in to this to me.

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