

# CURRENT BOOKS

## FELLOWS' CHOICE

*Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows of the Wilson Center*

### **THE GREAT CAT MASSACRE AND OTHER EPISODES IN FRENCH CULTURAL HISTORY**

by Robert Darnton  
Basic, 1984  
298 pp. \$17.95

Historians of the French *Annales* school, many of them affiliated with the political Left, have shifted the focus of studies in 18th-century French history from the cataclysmic events of the Revolution (1789–99) to the more enduring folkways and institutions of the Old Regime that preceded it.

Robert Darnton is one of the growing number of American historians influenced by the *Annalistes*. His *Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (1981) concentrated on the

hacks, printers, and booksellers of France's 18th-century Grub Street. Earlier, his *Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775–1800* (1979) described the commercial sale and distribution of the quarto edition of Denis Diderot's monumental publication, exposing the cutthroat competition and unscrupulous double-dealing behind its promotion. Like the *Annalistes*, who show more interest in peasants and vagabonds than in courtiers and ministers of state, Darnton deals more with culture-peddlers than with the intellectual luminaries and Philosophes such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire.

Since 1978, Darnton has been regularly teaching courses on popular culture with his Princeton colleague, anthropologist Clifford Geertz. This book, partly the product of that collaboration, reflects a broad anthropological concern with questions of popular attitudes, or, as the French would say, *mentalités*. Its six essays range widely about the world of 18th-century France, from the meaning of Mother Goose stories to French peasants, to readers' reactions to Rousseau, to the bizarre cat massacre mentioned in the title. Each chapter draws heavily on one previously unexploited documentary source—a file, for instance, kept by a mid-18th-century royal police inspector whose job was to keep an eye on intellectuals.

While the book manages to touch on all social classes, beginning with peasants and ending with Rousseau's elite readers, Darnton's goal is not to create the sort of global history written by such *Annaliste* historians as Fernand Braudel. He chooses, rather, the "thick description" of specific events or close analysis of single texts and, from these, extracts broader social and psychological meanings.

Relating the story of the "riotous massacre of cats" in a Paris printing shop during the late 1730s, Darnton explains how and why a group of workers carried out a cruelly ingenious act of revenge against their abusive masters. Imitating howling cats all night long, the workers convinced their employer and his wife that the neighborhood cats, including their own beloved pets, were bewitched. Alarmed, the master ordered his work-

ers to kill the animals. This they did, staging mock trials and executions. Killing the cats, although ordered by the master, was the workers' way of striking back. Darnton then proceeds to examine the general deterioration of working conditions in the French printing industry and explores the circumstances in which cats had been mistreated in various rituals since the 14th and 15th centuries ("witchcraft, orgy, cuckoldry, charivari, and massacre"), all expressing a deep, sadistic "current of popular culture." Darnton concludes that the cat executions, far from being "a dress rehearsal for the September Massacres of the French Revolution," were simply a ritualistic form of popular rebellion.



Darnton's method makes for colorful history, but even he recognizes its shortcoming. "Is there not," he asks, "something arbitrary in the selection of such material and something abusive in drawing general conclusions from it?" He is not alone in feeling some disquietude with his narrow picture of Old Regime society, where rakes, swindlers, restive workers, minor writers on the make, and women swooning under the influence of Rousseauian sentiment tend to crowd out their more plain and honest countrymen.

The moral world of Darnton's Old Regime is perhaps too uniformly one of advantage, self-interest, domination, and envy. In the Mother Goose tales that he claims were the favorites of French peasants, he finds a consistent message: "The world is made of fools and knaves, they say: better to be a knave than a fool." But how does this sweeping conclusion square with the moralistic romances and devotional chapbooks peddled throughout France in the 17th and 18th centuries and read at the same evening fireside gatherings where the the fairy tales were read? Has Darnton made an unbalanced selection of his Mother Goose tales, resulting in an overly one-dimensional picture of peasant mentality?

Finally, there is a problem with the anthropological approach, which assumes little or no constancy of human nature over time. When Darnton writes about 18th-century peasants, he seems almost to be writing about another species. Implicit in this approach is a belief that progress and enlightenment have since fundamentally separated *them* from *us*. A tone of condescension inevitably creeps in, and anthropology, which supposedly aims at eliminating the presumptions of cultural superiority, becomes a new means of portraying a moral and intellectual gulf between the traditional and modern worlds, a gulf which may not, in fact, be as wide as Darnton would have us believe.

—Robert Emmet Kennedy, Jr.