

Lesbian Decadence by Nicole G Albert: Book Review

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Lesbian Decadence by Nicole G Albert (Lesbian Decadence: Representations in Art and Literature of Fin-de-Siècle France) is a bit of an odd book: part historical survey, part cultural exploration, but what I hoped for and didn't find was an in-depth analysis and critique of the themes of "lesbian decadence" in their cultural and historical context. What I got was a wealth of excerpts and context for primary source material that could drive a lifetime's worth of exploration and re-purposing.

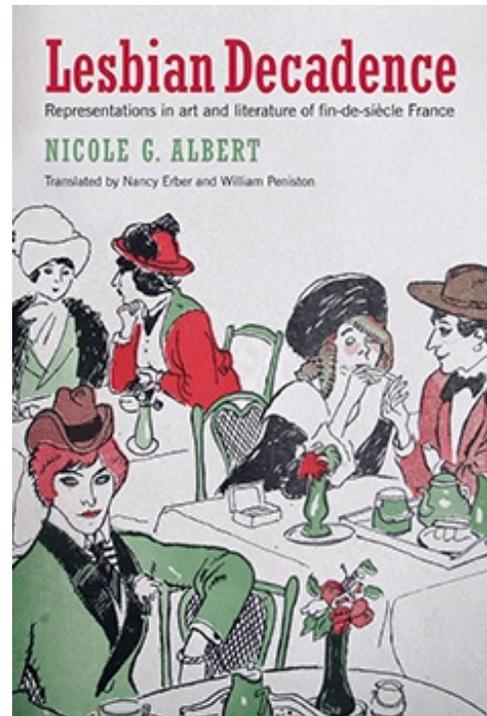
Albert takes the reader on a detailed and extensive—possibly even exhaustive—survey of the depiction of lesbians and lesbianism in French art and literature of the mid to late 19th century.

We begin with the "rediscovery" of the Greek poet Sappho and her work (a rediscovery that has happened multiple times over the centuries) and the ways in which Sappho's rumored sexuality were interpreted and depicted. This is followed by the rise of the psycho-medical model of homosexuality and in particular the ways in which the genre of medical case histories overlapped with and influenced sensational fiction. Framing lurid tales of lesbian affairs as psychological case histories was a means of making them acceptable to censors, but in turn the profusion of fiction about lesbian "decadence" shaped the opinions and conclusions of medical professionals.

The third section of the book turns to the ways in which decadent literature both pathologized and eroticized lesbians, linking same-sex love with themes of madness, debilitation, and death.

The Writing Style

Although *Lesbian Decadence* states outright that it focuses on lesbian themes in literature and art, it's easy to lose track of that context while reading. Even as the author points out the ways that medical writers adopted the sensational language of novelists in order to popularize their technical writing, Albert herself uses that same sensational vocabulary to talk about her subject with an unreflective air. When Albert writes, "Turn-of-the-century literature continually



emphasized the horrific damage caused by lesbianism” one can be forgiven for needing to go back and read the passage several times to be clear that she is representing the content of her studies and not asserting the “horrific damage” as a factual statement.

Similarly, the casual shifting between discussions of the portrayal of lesbians in fiction and references to historic women who were either authors themselves, or contemporaries of the authors being discussed, can blur the distinction between fiction and real life.

The book is best read with a pre-existing familiarity about the history of sexuality prior to the 19th century. The author is not always familiar with same-sex relationships in earlier centuries, or with the use of particular vocabulary prior to the period she specializes in. When she states that the 19th century sexologists “grant[ed] these sexual outcasts an identity for the first time,” she overlooks a vast amount of earlier experience. This book provides a wealth of information, but it requires careful reading and a solid grounding in the history of the times to sort out the data from the presentation.

The Pros

Lesbian Decadence is a rich and detailed source of information on the development of a literary motif that still informs the perception of lesbianism in popular culture today. It shows how the perverse imaginings of a movement of iconoclastic and almost overwhelmingly male writers and artists created a mythology with immense staying power that went on to help shape social and legal reactions to female same-sex relationships during the following century. The decadent movement re-invented the popular image of lesbians in western culture in a way that came close to erasing any other image. A thorough understanding of that process is vital to being able to peel away the layers of mythologizing that were accepted as fact throughout much of the 20th century.

Any writer who is planning to set a story in later 19th century France—whether in imitation of the decadent writers, or with a more realistic approach—will find this book an essential resource.

The Cons

I was disappointed that *Lesbian Decadence* remained little more than a descriptive catalog of the material it covered. I looked in vain for some in-depth analysis, for an interrogation of the themes and motifs, even for a clear and consistent distinction between myth and reality.

The most glaring omission was the obvious point that the creators of the lesbian decadence movement were overwhelmingly male and that the literary movement must be understood as representing male anxieties and fantasies rather than being rooted in any sort of reality about women’s lives.

I would have liked a critical examination of how negative depictions of lesbianism (and the weaponization of accusations of lesbianism) occurred in a context where women were gaining greater social and economic freedom, and can in many ways be viewed as a direct

misogynistic response to that freedom.

The Conclusion

I find that evaluating lesbian non-fiction is an entirely different experience than evaluating fiction. If the prose style of a novel doesn't work for me, I can just shrug and say, "not my thing." But historical works are a different matter. It isn't only that I'm reacting to them both as a source of information and as a reading experience, but the job of a historian necessarily includes sifting through material that may be uncomfortable or distasteful and rendering an honest account of it. We don't have the option of saying, "I want a story that ends differently." Furthermore, one isn't always able to pick and choose among non-fictional presentations of a topic. If a particular novel doesn't grab your fancy, there are many more. If a particular history book leaves you scratching your head, there may not be a different book on the same topic to move on to. I say this to put my overall conclusions into context.

This is an incredibly valuable reference work—just a couple months ago I was idly wondering if there were a good resource on this body of literature, and now that question is answered. I haven't found any other work that addresses the era and the topic in this much depth and scholarship. I have no hesitation in recommending it to anyone who is interested in the subject matter. At the same time, as a historical study, there are gaps in the analysis and presentation that could easily mislead the average reader about the realities of women's lives in 19th century France. Read with caution, but if you want to know more about the decadent movement, definitely read it.

Excerpt from *Lesbian Decadence* by Nicole G Albert

"Novelists and protosociologists did not hesitate to draw on those scholarly studies, and they became deeply preoccupied themselves with defining the parameters of "vice," which often meant mapping its progress through the body of the city. In the Belle Époque, if we believe Miss Don Juan, the American heroine of a French novel published in 1904, "the lesbian vice [began] to seem totally natural," but this heroine lived in Paris, the mecca of lesbianism around 1900. Renée Vivien, Natalie Clifford Barney, Gertrude Stein, and many other lesbians from English and American backgrounds led a freer life there, far from the puritanism and social constraints of their home countries. Djuna Barnes soon moved there, followed by other intellectuals. Some of these women were not satisfied just to live openly as lesbians; they also wrote about it in their work, traveling down these forbidden paths, as Sappho had done before them. Yet more often than not, they were written about—by men, who represented the vast majority of the authors who shaped the vision of sapphism in the late nineteenth century. They endowed the lesbian with a whole rhetoric about sexual deviance and tried to track her down in the urban landscape as well as in the underworld and in her most secretive places, to which they bragged about giving readers access."

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Lesbian Decadance

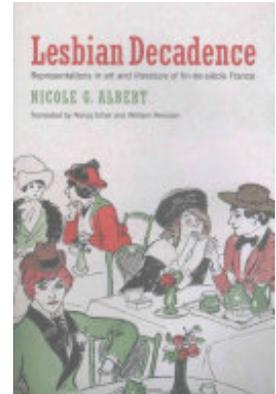
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In 1857 the French poet Charles Baudelaire, who was fascinated by lesbianism, created a scandal with *Les Fleurs du Mal* [The Flowers of Evil]. This collection was originally entitled "The Lesbians" and described women as "femmes damnées," with "disordered souls" suffering in a hypocritical world. Then twenty years later, lesbians in Paris dared to flaunt themselves in that extraordinarily creative period at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries which became known as the Belle Époque. *Lesbian Decadence*, now available in English for the first time, provides a new analysis and synthesis of the depiction of lesbianism as a social phenomenon and a symptom of social malaise as well as a fantasy in that most vibrant place and period in history. In this newly translated work, praised by leading critics as "authoritative," "stunning," and "a marvel of elegance and erudition," Nicole G. Albert analyzes and synthesizes an engagingly rich sweep of historical representations of the lesbian mystique in art and literature. Albert contrasts these visions to moralists' abrupt condemnations of "the lesbian vice," as well as the newly emerging psychiatric establishment's medical fury and their obsession on cataloging and classifying symptoms of "inversion" or "perversion" in order to cure these "unbalanced creatures of love." *Lesbian Decadence* combines literary, artistic, and historical analysis of sources from the mainstream to the rare, from scholarly studies to popular culture. The English translation provides a core reference/text for those interested in the Decadent movement, in literary history, in French history and social history. It is well suited for courses in gender studies, women's studies, LGBT history, and lesbianism in literature, history, and art.



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Heather Rose Jones writes fantasy and historically-inspired fiction. She is also a podcaster and writes reviews for books she highly recommends.

