
Bishop, Morris and Kenneth T. Rivers. *A Survey of French Literature.*

5 vols. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2005.
ISBN: 1-58510-106-0.

This five-volume series is an updated edition of a classic textbook published way back in the 1950s, long before most of us French professors knew that one day we, too, would be standing in front of a class of unsuspecting sophomores and juniors in an introduction to French literature class. If we had known, though, I think most of us would have felt considerably reassured if we had digested Morris Bishop's original two-volume edition in its entirety before entering the classroom on the first day of the fall semester. Those of us who had not made Bishop's acquaintance and had entered graduate school in the mid-1970s typically were spoon-fed a panoply of more or less esoteric materials, brilliant for the most part, but esoteric nonetheless, in lieu of the "great books" of canonical fame. Left to our own devices, we read up on what we had missed (and learned a lot in the process), so I guess all's well that ends well. At the end of the day, we had acquired a valuable interdisciplinary perspective but also the substance without which literary theory is just mush.

Morris Bishop, a pioneering *grand maître* of French studies in the U.S., died back in 1973, which speaks volumes about the longevity of his grand design of a comprehensive anthology of French literature readily accessible to an audience of American undergraduates. The original work (of which this reviewer still owns an autographed copy, a carry-over from his undergraduate days) has recently been reedited by our good friends at Focus Publishing. This new edition consists of five very manageable paperback volumes (the original work was published in what French students would call two "pavés," two rather intimidating hardcover tomes) and is co-edited by the honorable Kenneth T. Rivers, a well-published Professor of French at Lamar University in Texas and true humanist who has taken it upon himself to update Bishop's classic by including a slew of new authors (mainly women and Francophone writers), as well as a variety of ancillary materials that did not appear in the original edition, including updated and more amply annotated historical time

lines, a somewhat more extensive introduction to each period, text, and author studied — all in English, so as to promote a more immediate and better grasp of the material. For example, in Volume I, on the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century, the selection from *The Song of Roland* (which remains the same as in the original edition) is preceded by a smattering of background material on the burgeoning epic tradition, the Saracens, etc. Another obvious difference is that Professor Rivers has broken down background material and presented it in smaller chunks: “Troubadours and their Epics,” “Roland, Charlemagne and the Saracens,” and “The Story and its Artistry” (Vol. 1, 11-13). Unlike so many other literary readers and anthologies, however, selections are not accompanied by comprehension questions, classroom activities, and topics for further research. Other anthologies such as Lagarde et Michard (which many people in the field still like to trash) and Xavier Darcos’s five-volume masterpiece (which is more interdisciplinary, international, and up-to-date with regard to secondary sources than the former) do this with brio, as does the American duo Peter Schofer and Donald Rice (*Poèmes, Pièces et proses*, 1973). Of course, it goes without saying that most excerpts through Rabelais are rendered in modern French, since few if any readers today can understand Old French.

The introduction to each volume reiterates Morris Bishop’s pedagogy: “the editors of this compilation have been guided by certain principles: to introduce the student to the greatest masters of French literature; to make a Survey of Literature rather than a course in literary history; to choose famous examples rather than obscure ones; to choose examples more for their merit, interest, and present vitality than for their ‘significance’ or importance for other than literary reasons; to present one long selection in preference to a collection of tiny *morceaux*; and to make the entire text as user-friendly as possible for instructor and student alike” (Vol. I, 1). Bishop goes on to argue for a civilizing education that teaches wisdom rather than what the ancient Greeks called *techné*; his is a broad-based, humanistic pedagogy that distinguishes skill from mere competency and teaches the ability to think through “literature,” leading to wisdom. This teaching pedagogy “represents the long effort of man to understand himself and, if youth of today are to guide the world safely through the terrors of the atomic age, they must now serve their apprenticeship to wisdom. If I propose the study of literature as a means to wisdom, it is because I believe that in literature are most clearly written the means for the understanding of man’s nature and man’s world. And I propose that the teacher of literature take up this dreadful burden, not for the sake of literature, but for the sake of humanity” (Vol. I, 146).

Just as in the first two editions, edited by Bishop alone, each century (with the exception of the Middle Ages, which still shares a volume with the sixteenth century) is given a distinct identity but, in this third edition, is rewarded with a volume of its own. The selections remain nearly identical to the original edition and include several near-complete plays and short stories. The table of contents for each volume is as follows with an asterisk indicating a new author:

Volume I. The Middle Ages:

La Chanson de Roland; Le Roman Courtois (*Tristan et Yseut*, Marie de France); *Aucassin et Nicolette*; *Le Roman de la Rose*; *Le Jeu d’Adam*; *La farce du cuvier*; *La farce de Maître Pathelin*; Charles d’Orleans; Christine de Pisan;* Villon.

The Sixteenth Century:

Calvin (*Traité sur la foi*);* Rabelais; Marot; Labé;* Du Bellay; Ronsard; Montaigne.

Volume II. The Seventeenth Century:

Descartes (*Le Discours de la méthode*); Pascal (*Pensées*); Corneille (*Le Cid*); Racine (*Phèdre*); Molière (*Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*); Boileau; Perrault;* La Fontaine; La Rochefoucauld; La Bruyère; Bossuet; Fénelon; Madame de Sévigné; Madame de La Fayette.

In this volume, however, the rubrics housing each author are confusing and sometimes downright bewildering: Perrault and La Fontaine apparently are “for the children” alone, La Bruyère and La Rochefoucauld strictly for “moralists;” Bossuet and Fénelon are “clerics;” as for Madame de Sévigné and Madame de La Fayette, they are “two noblewomen” (hardly an improvement from the rubric “Two Women” in the original edition). Why Descartes and the troika of dramatists mentioned above should not be entitled to a rubric of their own is not immediately clear.

Volume III. The Eighteenth Century:

Fontenelle (*Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*); Lesage (*Gil Blas*); Marivaux (*L'île des esclaves*); L'Abbé Prevost (*Manon Lescaut*); Montesquieu (*Lettres persanes, L'Esprit des lois*); Voltaire (*Candide*); Diderot (*Le Neveu de Rameau*); Laclos (*Les Liaisons dangereuses*);* Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (*Paul et Virginie*);* Rousseau (*Discours sur l'inégalité, Émile, Confessions*); Buffon (*Discours sur le style*); Chamfort (*Maximes*); Beaumarchais (*Le mariage de Figaro*); Condorcet (*Des progrès futurs de l'esprit humain*); Rivarol (*Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française*);* Vauvenargues (*Réflexions et maximes*);* Sade (*Justine*);* Maistre;* *La Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du Citoyen*;* Chénier;* Bonaparte.*

Volume IV. The Nineteenth Century:

Chateaubriand (*Mémoires d'outre-tombe, René*); Staël;* Lamartine; Vigny; Hugo (there is far less of him, though, than in the original edition); Musset; Stendhal; Balzac (*La femme abandonnée*); Mérimée (*Imango*); Sand; Sainte-Beuve (*La méthode critique*); Flaubert (*Un coeur simple*); Zola (*L'inondation*); Gautier; Leconte de Lisle; Heredia; Baudelaire; Verlaine; Rimbaud; Mallarmé; Maeterlinck; Maupassant (*La Serre*). Alphonse Daudet and Anatole France have been dropped.

Volume V. The Twentieth Century:

Not surprisingly, this volume has seen numerous changes. To be sure, the first part still features the very same selections as in the original edition: Verne, Péguy, Claudel, Valéry, Proust, Gide, Colette, Apollinaire, Breton, Saint-John Perse, Cocteau, Sartre, Camus, Michaux, Artaud, Ionesco, Beckett, Genet, Césaire, and Senghor. Authors dropped from this edition include Giraudoux, Mauriac, Malraux, Giono, Michaux, Aragon, Éluard, Prévert, Queneau, Saint-Exupéry, and Anouilh.

Some of these authors probably were too difficult for students, but it is a shame about Malraux, Mauriac, Saint-Exupéry, and Prévert, since it has been my experience that students relate well to these particular authors. However, Rivers has tried very hard to accommodate the changing nature of Francophone literary discourse by including new rubrics that pay attention, for example, to cinema and Francophone literature. In “Rise of the Media,” Volume V looks at French cinema and drama, in particular the *nouvelle vague* movement, and includes contributions by film critic Joël Magny on the so-called *auteur* controversy in French cinema, director Eric Rohmer’s short story *La Boulangère de Monceau* (which eventually made it to the big screen), and Vera Feyder’s radio drama *Démocratie aux Champs*. In the following rubric, entitled *Beyond France*, Rivers introduces students to Québec, French Louisiana, and the Maghreb, giving the floor to Québécois author Anne Hébert, the Cajun poet-singer-songwriter Zachary Richard, and the Maghrebi writer Abdellatif Laâbi. Both of the preceding sections actually make up the second half of this volume, subtitled *The Late Twentieth Century*, which also includes selections by Simone de Beauvoir (who died in 1986 and therefore, by some, may not be considered representative of the late twentieth century since she ended her distinguished literary career long before then), Marguerite de Yourcenar (ditto), Claude Simon, Robbe-Grillet, Michel Tournier, and Amélie Nothomb.

The selections all are pretty much standard fare in anthologies of French literature developed with the American undergraduate in mind and, for the most part, should be familiar to experienced instructors. The editors’ strategy is basically a sound one: students should be familiar with the “best of the best,” by which I mean the best-known works by the most well-known writers. Marginal works by lesser-known writers just don’t make the cut, however brilliant they may be. The editors seem to subscribe to the theory that anthologies should reflect prevailing taste — the consensus, if you will — rather than help create a new canon, which presumably means that they underestimate the normative importance they have as editors. The literary past of France is written in stone. However, with regard to the late twentieth century, it is clear that Rivers has taken a more activist approach and shown considerable initiative by including so many little-known writers who may or may not make it to the hallowed shores of posterity.

As the editors point out, the book aims at “inclusion rather than exclusion” (Vol I, 1). Still, it goes without saying that not every worthy author can be included, but there is more than enough to go around. It is a rare class — even a one-year course — that can do justice to all five volumes in this series. So, instructors will have to pick and choose judiciously to find those authors and texts that seem most appropriate for their particular class. Perhaps they will want to include another play by Molière, say, and can easily find an inexpensive French edition. Perhaps they will want to include a more sophisticated critical apparatus. Perhaps they will want to include study questions and group projects of their own, given the fact that the editors provide little more than vocabulary notes. But the basic fact is that one must start somewhere, and this five-volume set is as good a starting point as any. Until undergraduate students have mastered the basics, they are not really in a good position to challenge any literary paradigm with any degree of credibility, now, are they? Although one might disagree about specifics, the overall design of this project is

very persuasive. There just happens to be such a thing as a body of great French literature which has developed and matured over time and which looks to posterity, that is, to teachers to transmit the wisdom of the *anciens et modernes* to future generations. Granted, some parts of the canon are more worthy of preservation than others, to say nothing of new arrivals who knock on the door of tradition, demanding admission; however, until one has gained some sense of critical perspective, it is difficult to speak with any degree of authority about who should be present or not at the *table ronde* of one thousand years of French literature. It is up to each individual instructor to use this series as a base and teach each text critically to truly fulfill the humanistic potential of literature, which is to graduate students who can think critically about the present after digesting the lessons of the past.

Although this new edition of an old classic has its limitations, as mentioned above, its many good qualities are far more obvious in the mind of this reviewer. *A Survey of French Literature* can be used in a one-year long survey of French literature and, why not, in a century-specific survey of, say, the seventeenth century in which the instructor uses it as a home base, in addition to which students read a variety of other texts. *A Survey of French Literature* is far more *maniable* than either Lagarde et Michard or Xavier Darcos, and better suited to the needs of American undergraduates.

Tom Conner
Professor of Modern Languages and Literatures
St. Norbert College
De Pere, WI

Publisher's Response

Thank you for this extensive review of the five-volume *Survey of French Literature*, originally published by the venerable Morris Bishop, which Kenneth Rivers has updated. This project was an opportunity to provide a very reasonably priced and flexible solution to covering literature at the second-, third- and fourth-year levels. Any literature survey text requires its editor to make hundreds of choices, all important to someone, and each of them difficult to make. Yet the desire was not to define an exclusive list, but to provide the essentials at a reasonable price, and allow the instructor to make the appropriate selections.

Ron Pullins
Focus Publishing